



MODERN *Villainess*

IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING
A CORPORATE EMPIRE
BEFORE THE CRASH

WRITTEN BY
TOFURO
FUTSUKAICHI

ILLUSTRATED BY KEI

NOVEL

3



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September 11th, 2001

Koizumi Souichirou

Keikain Runa

“Rest well,
and thank you
for what
you’ve done.
What comes
next is
a job for
adults.”





Connecting your present to your future

DEPARTING
FROM TOKYO
TO THE EIGHTY-
EIGHT TEMPLES.
BRINGING YOU
CLOSER TO
ENLIGHTENMENT.



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Shikoku Shinkansen



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Seven Seas Entertainment

MODERN VILLAINESS: IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING
A CORPORATE EMPIRE BEFORE THE CRASH
VOL. 3

Gendai Shakai de Otome Game no Akuyaku Reijou
wo Suru no wa Chotto Taihen Vol. 3
©2021 Tofuro Futsukaichi

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COPY EDITOR: Rebecca Scoble
PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Laurel Ashgrove
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-701-9
Printed in Canada
First Printing: July 2023
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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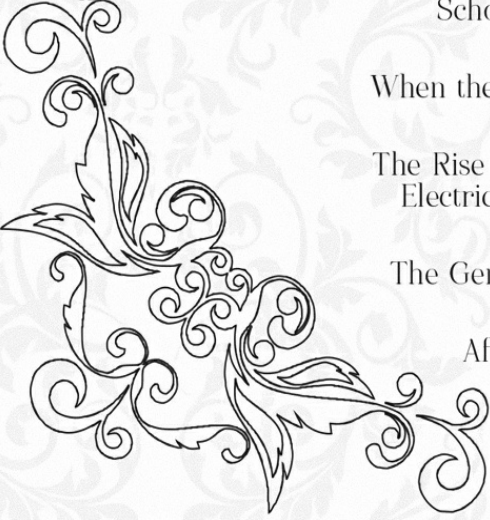
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Afterword



President of Akamatsu Corporation.

TODOU NAGAYOSHI



Runa's friend. Comes from a noble religious family. She's unfindable in hide-and-seek.

KAHOIN HOTARU



A politician in the House of Representatives for the Fellowship of Constitutional Government. Current Prime Minister.

KOIZUMI SOUCHIROU



A dietman in the House of Representatives and a member of the Fellowship of Constitutional Government. Current Deputy Prime Minister.

IZUMIKAWA TATSUNOSUKE



A maid of the Keikain household. Likes cameras.

TOKITOU AKI



A maid of the Keikain household. Formerly revered for her night business in Ginza.

SAITOU KEIKO



TAKANASHI MIZUHO

The main heroine of the otome game, "Love Where the Cherry Blossom Falls."

TEIA SHUUICHI

Head of the Teia Group and Eiichi's father.

KATSURA NAOYUKI

Works in the Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank's integrated development department.

TAKAMIYA HARUKA

Manager of the Imperial Gakushuukan Academy's communal library.

MAEFUJI SHOUICHI

Director of Foreign Affairs for the National Police Agency's Public Safety Bureau.

KATSURA NAOMI

A descendant of the Keikain bloodline. Has a son named Naoyuki.

A villainess reincarnated into an otome video game world set in modern society.

KEIKAIN RUNA



MODERN Villainess

IT'S NOT EASY BUILDING
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Youngest son to Dietman Izumikawa Tatsunosuke. A potential love interest.

IZUMIKAWA YUJIROU



Son to the family that owns Teia Motor Co., Japan's top automobile enterprise. A potential love interest.

TEIA EIICHI



Keikain Runa's personal butler. Supports Runa in both public and private affairs.

TACHIBANA RYUJI



The only son to Gotou Mitsutoshi and a budget analyst in the Ministry of Finance's budget division. A potential love interest.

GOTOU MITSUYA



Runa's friend. Her father is a dietman in the House of Representatives. Calls mandarins "oranges."

KASUGANO ASUKA

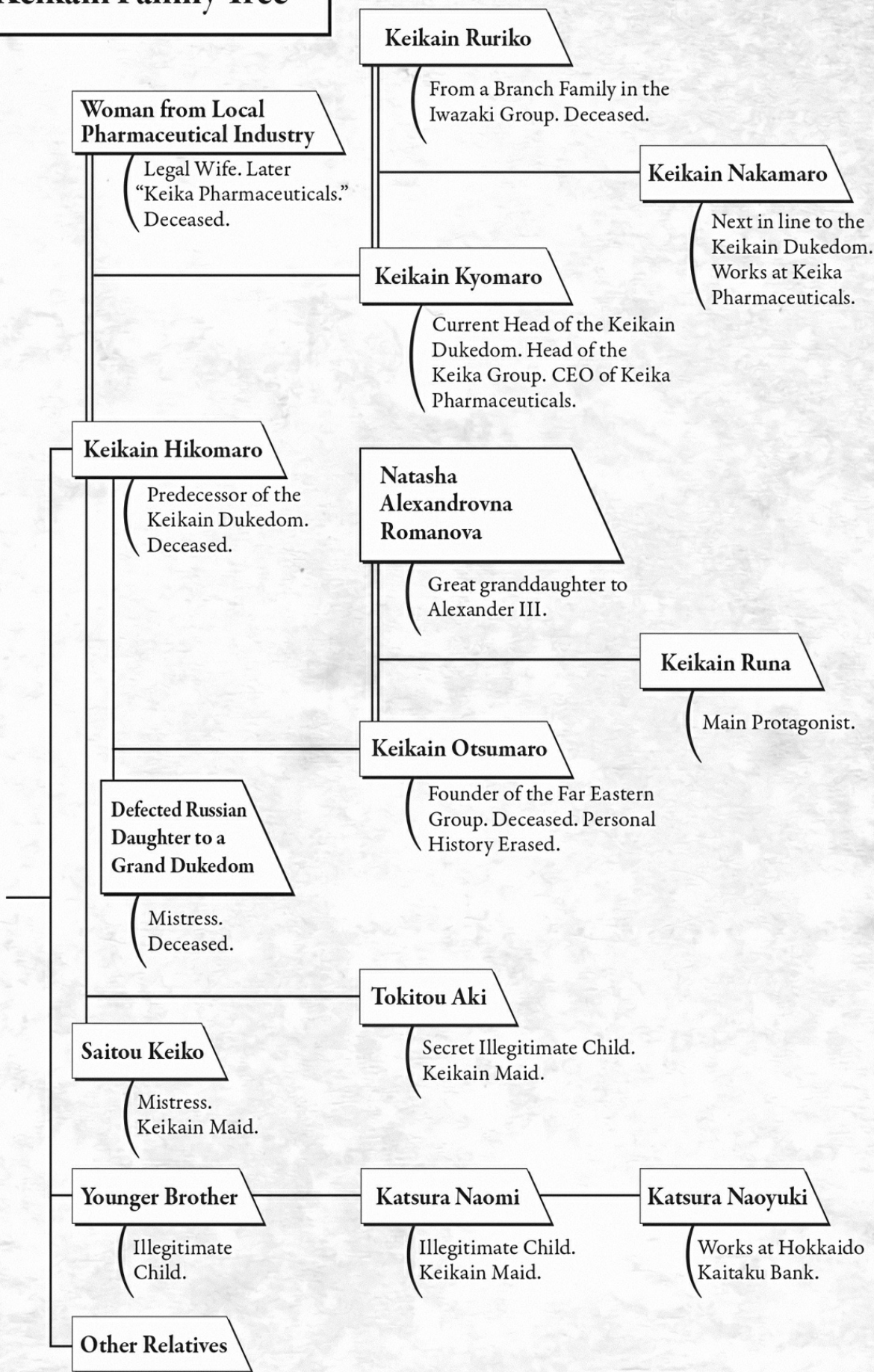


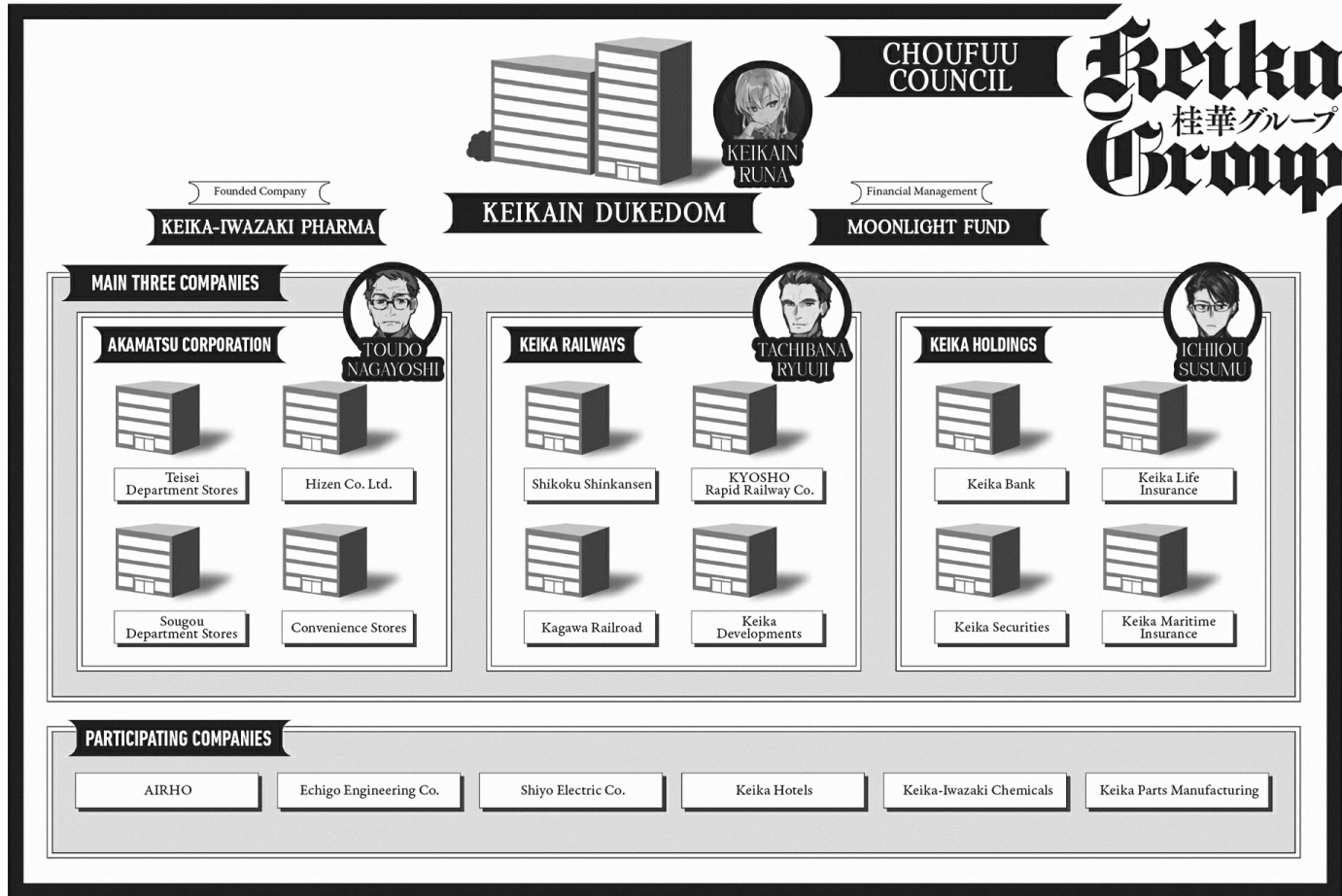
CEO of Keika Holdings. Has a daughter named Erika.

ICHIJOU SUSUMU



Keikain Family Tree





TV Live Watch pt. 2001

1: Anonymous: ID: ???

Previous thread

<http://.....>

2: Anonymous: ID: ???

2nd

So, today's the "Imperial Guard" special?

I'm excited.

3: Anonymous: ID: ???

I heard that the budget was even higher than a prime time drama.

That's what happens when you've got the entire Keika Group backing you!

Oh, it's starting.

4: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>>3

I heard the talent was complaining that the Keika Group approached production directly, so the ad agencies wouldn't be involved.

10: Anonymous: ID: ???

Why aren't they airing this during prime time?

11: Anonymous: ID: ???

I thought I'd heard this OP before. Turns out it's the same composer from that one anime!

18: Anonymous: ID: ???

Excuse me?

Keikain Runa Keikain Runa (it's really her).

20: Anonymous: ID: ???

Hang on.

Is that really her?

Actually, I've seen her face on the posters for Teisei Department Stores!

29: Anonymous: ID: ???

Look at the guards and maids with that group of crooks! This is the real deal!!!

30: Anonymous: ID: ???

I've seen these guys in Akihabara.

[Image link]

34: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>30

Look at that angel!!!!!!

Akihabara is insane.

35: Anonymous: ID: ???

The maids are lined up like guards of honor.

So are these armed maids Her Little Majesty's private army?!

36: Anonymous: ID: ???

Is this a picture from the "Akihabara Daimyo's Maid Procession Incident" that went down not too long ago?!

37: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>36

Was that related to all the crazy stuff that happened?!

39: Anonymous: ID: ???

What a power phrase... "Akihabara Daimyo's Maid Procession Incident"

41: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>39

I heard that a young lady from a noble family tried to sneak into a maid café she learned about, but then her ex-CIA secretary sent her off with secret service levels of protection...

Maids riding motorcycles around a limousine...

Maids wearing sunglasses, surrounding their mistress protectively...

Maids who stopped the paparazzi from getting a good shot of the young lady raging at her secretary in the streets since the secretary tried to rent out an entire building, instead of a single shop, for protection...

...That's how the whole crowd ended up looking so much like a glimpse of hell...

43: Anonymous: ID: ???

Whoa...

50: Anonymous: ID: ???

Holy crap.

It's the middle of a gunfight, but they're not even talking, just moving around based on hand signals...

Also, look at Her Majesty move *pant pant*

52: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>50

Pervert! There's a perv among us!!

53: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>50

Reported.

58: Anonymous: ID: ???

Hang on.

The queen was betrayed by someone on the inside.

60: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>58

She's still just a kid, but she's got the Romanov family treasure and is super rich too, with trillions in assets.

Not many people could look at that much money right in front of them and not want to betray someone.

63: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>58

They don't even betray her for a cool offer like a big check.

Apparently, they slammed down stacks of 10 million yen in cash on the table one at a time.

I respect commoners who don't fall for that.

68: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>63

What the hell? That's terrifying.

71: Anonymous: ID: ???

I see. So a kidnapping would be what gets personal security involved, but since the criminal organization is Russian, the Public Safety Bureau went for it instead.

It's surreal that this is a three-way deadlock with the maid corps. Do real maids actually have that much power?

78: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>71

They do. That's what makes them such a nuisance.

Nobles still practice the custom of family laws, which they enacted so noble families can try their own members for crimes on the inside.

They also still have some diplomatic immunity left from the House of Peers, or

what we know as the House of Councilors today, which makes dealing with the crimes of noble families quite the headache.

Even worse than that is the Privy Council, the bastion for nobles. It's like a watchdog for the law, and even serves as something like a proxy for the Diet when the Diet is excused...

This heroine's maids are the people closest to Her Majesty, so they can act as proxies of the duke's daughter and defend against police interference.

To be frank, it's like taking on a daimyo family, just without the land.

79: Anonymous: ID: ???

Ah...

So it's like a "The bakufu can't comment on what happens in my domain!" kind of thing.

Sounds like something from the Edo period...

80: Anonymous: ID: ???

The nobles are just the ruins of the daimyo military families.

81: Anonymous: ID: ???

So this is why zaibatsu members marry nobles to get titles?

I definitely see the appeal of diplomatic immunity.

82: Anonymous: ID: ???

I remember how diplomatic immunity played a part in the second February 26 Incident too, after it was kicked off when that author talked about "the fulfillment of the Showa Restoration!"

The nobles are all infected with socialism, and the imperial police must have stood in the firing line of the Anpo protest suppression since the Special Higher

Police were broken up.

That's why they say things like "zaibatsu dissolution" and "breaking down the privileged classes."

They did a surprisingly good job suppressing that revolt.

86: Anonymous: ID: ???

Hey...

These guys have already started dragging each other down in this investigation.

87: Anonymous: ID: ???

Maid corps: Don't stick your nose in our business!

Bodyguards: But we can't protect her unless we know your business!!

Public Safety Bureau: What's this? You have business you want to hide?

88: Anonymous: ID: ???

You've got an extremely Japanese example of groups tearing each other down, and a criminal organization that makes up for a lack of firepower with wisdom and bravery.

Huh?

89: Anonymous: ID: ???

There it is!!! The criminal group is actually Russian intelligence!!!

90: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

Now we're getting to normal late-night stuff.

A long commercial that shows each one of the Keika Group's businesses.

They've gotten pretty big...

101: Anonymous: ID: ???

Huh? Wasn't Keika gonna merge with the Iwazaki zaibatsu?

103: Anonymous: ID: ???

They said that on the news.

Keika Pharmaceuticals becomes Keika-Iwazaki Pharmaceuticals.

Keika Chemicals becomes Keika-Iwazaki Chemicals.

Keika Corp and Keika Storage are apparently going to be absorbed by Iwazaki Yusen and Iwazaki Logistics.

107: Anonymous: ID: ???

Iwazaki eats up the small fry again.

I'm sure what they really want is Keika Holdings, then the Akamatsu Corporation.

110: Anonymous: ID: ???

They say now that Keika Holdings has dealt with its bad debts, they can aim not just for megabanks like Imperial Iwazaki Bank and Futaki-Yodoyabashi Bank, but foreign capital too.

111: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>110

Akamatsu Corporation is a major transporter of Russian crude oil.

Based on how the Iwazaki zaibatsu is digging into Karafuto, I'm sure they want that company more than anything.

116: Anonymous: ID: ??

Why is Iwazaki even bothering taking over the boring Keika businesses?

118: Anonymous: ID: lunakeikain

>>116

Hint: Political marriage.

120: Anonymous: ID: ???

>>118

Sounds like even the people on top have their own struggles...

Glossary and Notes

Diplomatic immunity: For example, Diet members cannot be arrested while the Diet is in session. When the House of Peers turned into the House of Councilors, diplomatic immunity was enacted to avoid chaos in the National Diet, as nobles wanted a way to have special privileges while escaping the responsibility of defeat. Runa’s grandfather is a real demon for coming up with that idea.

Privy Council: An organization with the right to pull out imperial edicts—the Japanese empire’s trump card—as an advisory committee to the emperor. It may appear to have no real power, but its existence is what allowed the nobles to exist until today. Combined with diplomatic immunity, this allows nobles such as Runa’s parents to continuously commit crimes.

Second February 26 Incident: I laughed when I looked up “Kerberos Saga”

and saw that it had its own version of 2/26.

Chapter 1:

Ichijou Erika, Graduate of Professor Kanbe's Seminar, and Her New Job

ICHIJOU ERIKA was a perfectly normal girl born in Yamagata Prefecture. Her father had been working at Far Eastern Bank, a local establishment where her mother served as a clerk. The two shared a workplace romance and were eventually married.

Born and raised in the town of Sakata, Erika first moved to Tokyo after her father, Ichijou Susumu, was promoted to manager of the bank's Tokyo branch. But that didn't happen until after she graduated from her local high school and was accepted into a private mission's university, at which point she and her mother finally joined Ichijou Susumu in Tokyo.

Even as the branch manager of Tokyo's Far Eastern Bank, Susumu had only been in the bottom tier of elites. Erika still remembered how her father struggled to pay for the Tokyo high-rise apartment where they lived. But while Erika was in college, Far Eastern Bank was taken over by Keika Holdings, which allowed the family to move from their apartment into a house within one of Tokyo's twenty-three districts. Susumu became the youngest person in history to serve on the board of a Japanese megabank, and he made great use of his talents there—a changed man from the father who was so concerned with loan payments.

“Erika, have you given any thought to your future after graduation?”

He may have been on the board of a megabank in the outside world, but at home, he was just a normal father. Recently, Erika had started distancing herself from her father due to his new habit of complaining. While Susumu would usually grumble about the resulting loneliness to his wife, this time he had his work face on—the face of a megabank board member—as he questioned his daughter.

“The economy's starting to recover, so I'm thinking of applying to the more

successful local businesses instead of a major company.”

“I’ve arranged a job for you in case you end up with nowhere to work. If you want it, come talk to me.”

“Fine...”

Erika would have been lying if she said that she wasn’t interested, but considering the job was coming from her father’s connections, she assumed it had to be something like a teller at Keika Bank. Erika already planned on leaving her job and moving back to Yamagata once she was married, so this didn’t seem like a terrible prospect. Casually, she questioned her father about the details.

“Where is it? What’s the job?”

“It would be at the home of the Keikain family, where you’d serve as Runa-sama’s personal maid and secretary.”

Her father’s employer, Keika Holdings, was part of the Keika Group, which had expanded rapidly over the past few years. Little was known about its owners, the Keikain family. However, they’d come to the aid of troubled businesses like the Teisei Department Stores or the Akamatsu Corporation, increasing their values and leaving Ichijou Erika with the impression that the Keika Group probably wasn’t evil.

When she decided to at least attend an informational meeting about the company, she instead found out that no such meetings existed. The reason was simple enough. The Keika Group had expanded by buying up troubled businesses, which led to restructuring every time. The result was a surplus of employees who could easily be reassigned at any point. Of course, they did list a few jobs, since recruiting *no* outsiders would cause obstacles in succession throughout the organization, but those positions were only available to those with connections.

It was only then that Ichijou Erika understood just how impressive her father’s connections were, as well as the significance of the opportunity he was offering his daughter. That was what made Erika determined not to rely on his help. She couldn’t waste such a favor on a temporary job to hold on to until she got married. Instead, she interviewed at a few other companies. They all made her tentative offers, but they also asked the same question every time.

“Is your father CEO Ichijou of Keika Holdings?”

In the end, they weren't after Ichijou Erika, but Ichijou Erika's father instead.

On the rooftop of a Teisei Department Store, Erika let out a sigh in between bites of the sandwich she'd purchased in the underground shopping center.

In a way, she'd merely been given a taste of reality, but she wasn't mature enough to accept those experiences yet. Eating a meal at a rooftop amusement park, on a weekday when it wasn't so crowded, wasn't an unpleasant experience. At that moment, she spotted a young girl walking by with a few adults trailing behind her.

“This is it! I want to make a rooftop garden like this! With a pond full of koi fish!”

Erika's first impression of her was that, even for a young rich girl, she was dreaming of quite a large-scale project. Erika, who was interested in fish and had a tank in her bedroom, casually murmured a sentence to herself that would forever change her destiny.

“Koi fish? But your pond will get dirty.”

The girl and her followers turned to look at Ichijou Erika. Apparently, she'd been speaking louder than she thought.

Under the mistaken impression that the young Caucasian girl with blonde hair was a foreigner on a sightseeing tour, Ichijou Erika decided that she might as well take the opportunity to stick her nose into the child's business. She approached her.

“Koi fish are actually omnivores. That means they eat anything, and that has a big effect on the ecosystem of the pond.”

The girl stopped her attendants from holding their hands in front of her protectively. She began to question Erika in fluent Japanese. Ichijou Erika was a normal woman, but she was also a bit of an airhead, which was why she didn't realize that the girl she was speaking with was the same one from the posters of the department store at which she'd just been shopping. She also completely failed to recognize the girl as the opera singer from the Imperial Gakushuukan Academy culture festival her father had taken her to see.

“Really? But I always see people putting koi fish in ponds and feeding them.”

“It might work out if the fish have a caretaker. But if they don’t...”

“If they don’t...?”

The young girl was thoroughly intrigued by Erika’s deliberate pause.

“You’ll be swarmed by mosquitos.”

It was no easy task to maintain water quality. Water itself could easily get dirty, and dirty water was a target for mosquitos.

“Young lady, you don’t intend to go fish-watching at a pond in the winter, right? It would be so cold. It feels refreshing to be around water during the summer months, from spring until autumn.”

“Definitely!”

Ichijou Erika saw the young girl’s proud nod and decided to follow up with a matter-of-fact description of the terrors such a choice would bring. This sort of story worked best when it really got the imagination going.

“Wearing a yukata by the waterside on a summer evening...how lovely. But that’s when the swarms of mosquitos hit. Sure, one mosquito on its own is fine, but just like those dark little devils that appear in your kitchen, seeing one of them means thirty more are hiding somewhere nearby...”

“N-NOOOOOOOOOO!”

The girl clung to one of her guardians in horror while Ichijou Erika shook her head to banish the image from her mind. Neither of them paid any attention to the cold, questioning stares of the attendants.

“So if they’ll eat anything, that must include the plants in their pond that keep the water clean, right? I’m sure it gets polluted very fast. My lady, may I ask if the koi pond looked dirty?”

The girl gasped and nodded. Quietly, she murmured an acknowledgment.

“That’s right. The water was all green...”

Erika wondered if the young girl was going to give up on her mission to keep koi fish. In any case, she felt bad for the department store employee standing

behind their group, who had been there to help the girl purchase things for a fishpond. She decided to offer a revised plan to the young girl, taking her personal requests into account.

“Do you know what a biotope is, Miss?”

A while later, the girl finished up her purchases of a hibachi above-ground pond, aquatic plants, and some Japanese rice fish. She expressed her gratitude to Erika.

“Thanks for your help. I learned a lot, so please let me return the favor.”

“No, that’s all right. I needed a break from the stress of my job hunt, so let’s call it even.”

“Huh? You’re trying to find work? Now I feel bad about having you do all this...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve received tentative offers already, and if things get really bad, I can always get my dad to help me. I may not look like it, but my dad’s a big deal at Keika Bank!”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

“...Huh?”

The first two noises of confusion came from the girl’s attendants, while the last was from Ichijou Erika herself, reacting to their reaction. But the airheaded Erika came to the wrong conclusion.

“Actually, my dad was interviewed recently on the news. I guess you’ve heard of him, Miss? Sorry about that. Well, I wanted to see how far I could make it without his connections, but everyone’s only interested in him, not me. That’s why the job hunt continues.”

“I see. If it were me, I wouldn’t let that kind of opportunity slide.”

“I’ll ask him if I end up needing to, but I only want to work for a few years until I get married, so I have to find something temporary.”

Erika decided she had chatted with them for too long, so she walked into the

elevator to head out. Waving her hand as the door closed, Ichijou Erika bid the young girl farewell.

“Goodbye, Miss. Be sure to grow into a wonderful person who adores nature.”

A few days later, an incredibly long limousine pulled up to the front of Ichijou Erika’s house. Ichijou Susumu called his daughter out of her bedroom, where she had been busy staring at her beloved fish tank to cheer herself up.

“Huh? The young lady who gifted you this house for becoming CEO is here?!”

“Inviting your subordinates or important guests to your home for overnight stays and parties is a vital part of the job, so I’ll pay for this house as a work expense. Sorry it’s just a secondhand one we obtained through a nonperforming loan!”

That was apparently what she’d said to him at the time. Erika didn’t know how to react to the person who’d provided her current home, nor did she understand why someone so rich was coming to meet with her, a simple college student, and not her father.

“What the hell did you do to make Runa-sama come all the way out here?!”

“I have no idea!”

“You must have done *something!*”

“I really don’t know! Believe me, Dad!”

Erika figured it out as soon as they came face-to-face. Oh, she knew. She knew, all right.

“Let me introduce you. This is Keikain Runa-sama, my boss.”

Ichijou Susumu maintained a calm expression despite the bead of sweat that dripped down his cheek and onto the floor. Later, Erika would learn that her father had to take stomach medicine that night upon hearing the details of the meeting between his daughter and his boss.

“Thanks again for the biotope. It’s difficult, but it’s fun too, and it makes me think of you.”

The young girl bowed her head to Ichijou Erika—a rich and powerful person expressing humility toward a mere unemployed college student.

“I have a request. Please allow me to be ordinary through you.”

This was the story of how Ichijou Erika was hired by the Keikain family to become Runa’s personal maid and secretary.

“Cheers!”

With that familiar shout, the group began to drink and chat. This was a graduation party for the students of Professor Kanbe, an economics teacher at a certain private university who taught them in his seminars. The professor’s class schedule included a welcome party and a graduation party that counted toward his students’ attendance. This meant that the party included enough guests to require the use of a major hotel hall.

The person who took on the job of organizing the party received the perk of being excused from writing a report, but there were conditions in exchange. The organizer had to rent out a hotel hall and throw a lavish party, finance it with donations, and come out of it with money remaining. This was Professor Kanbe’s method of allowing the students to experience fine cuisine at a hotel reception, and this unique teaching style combined with his excused absence requirements had made his classes very well known.

The conditions for excused absences were to wear a watch that cost over 100,000 yen and get a tailor-made suit to wear to both the welcome and graduation parties. The Kanbe Seminar’s employment rate was better than that of other classes.



“I can’t believe we managed to snag the Shinjuku Keika Hotel.”

“That must be thanks to Ichijou-san, right?”

“Well, her dad’s the CEO of Keika Holdings, and she’s going to work at the Keikain home as a maid. In a way, it’s only natural.”

There was some jealousy in that voice, but Ichijou Erika was an airheaded woman who generally didn’t notice such things.

For better or for worse, she was bad at reading the room. That was why, when the party planner came to her crying for help, Erika went straight to her future boss without a second thought.

“My lady, we’re going to be holding a graduation party soon. Do you know of any good hotels?” Erika had asked.

As she hadn’t graduated yet, she was working there as a sort of intern. The Russian maid who was assisting her shot her a look.

“You’re kidding me. Don’t you remember how our company works?! In fact, I’m sure one of our hotels is available!” she pleaded silently, not that Erika noticed.

But in a way, their boss was just as much of an airhead.

“Why don’t you just use one of our hotels?”

“Sure, but I don’t know if we have enough money for a reservation.”

“If you’re short, feel free to send me the receipt.”

“No, I couldn’t do that. It helps our grades if we come out of the party with a surplus from the money we put in for it.”

“In that case, I’ll lower the price for you. That way, it won’t be our fault if those who come don’t make enough profit for a good grade.”

In the young girl’s past life, finding a job had been so difficult that most students could hardly think of things like graduation parties. They didn’t even have their futures planned out yet.

Of course, no one else was likely to understand that she was granting Erika an opportunity for something she’d missed out on herself.

It would be no exaggeration to say that Ichijou Erika received extra favor amongst the girl's suddenly expanded personal staff due to her unusual position. But Erika's role in the organization was obtained by her own merits, not any help from her father. The more capable staff referred to her as "Miss Runa's Clown" because of her unique personality.

Ichijou Erika, who knew nothing about any of this, made a reservation at Shinjuku Keika Hotel as the representative of the Kanbe Seminar. The staff checked with Runa when they saw Erika's name, just to be safe, and they received casually delivered instructions to "give her a discount." The hotel ended up having to provide much more than Erika reserved.

That was how every last bit of food and alcohol at the party ended up being the very best of the best.

"Japanese, Chinese, even Western food. They've got it all here..."

"Oh, I saw this dish on TV! It was featured on that 'Pro Chefs' show!"

"This is that famous wine from Hokkaido!"

"There're maids standing around here like that's totally normal. Are they from the Keikain household?"

While the students delighted in all the first-rate food and drink, at the center of the table sat Professor Kanbe, the leader of the seminar, who was only casually nibbling on what was in front of him. Ichijou Erika, who was seated at his side as one of the graduating students, called out to him.

"Don't you like the food?"

"No, the food and booze are fantastic, Ichijou-kun. I was just thinking about my own research topic."

"Ah, the economics of genius, right? You said the twenty-first century is going to be the era of geniuses, didn't you?"

"To be more accurate, the transmission of personal information through the internet is going to have a big influence on society, and it'll probably magnify the influence that individuals can exact as a result. Until now, the eras of mass production and consumption have made prodigies more valuable than

geniuses. But as that model declines, the more a single genius will be able to change the world. I believe the IT industry in the United States might be bringing that reality into existence.”

Of course, this view would be treated as abnormal in academic society, but Professor Kanbe was able to remain in his current role at a private university because he could present a theory as to why the Japanese societal model was failing to function. He was also invited on TV shows as a commentator. Those connections were how he came to befriend Minister Takenaga Nobutame, who oversaw economic and fiscal policy.

He agreed with Minister Takenaga’s strategy of changing the environment by strengthening the strongest in society instead of bailing out the weak, and many people discussed his radical theory that if a single genius emerged out of the sacrifice of a million prodigies, it would have a positive effect on the income and expenditures of the country. That said, on the day after one of Professor Kanbe’s TV appearances, his students generally enjoyed a free study day in lieu of a seminar, so he was a good teacher to have in terms of classwork as well. That was the reason why Ichijou Erika joined his seminar.

“You see, Ichijou-kun, I think the model of the Japanese economy has been on the verge of change for the past few years due to a single genius.”

Erika wondered what he meant.

Speaking on TV meant gaining information through the media. As a result, Professor Kanbe knew much more about the Keika Group than Ichijou Erika. But now one of his own seminar students was joining the core of the organization, and he could never find a better research subject no matter how hard he looked. However, he decided to ask her about it nonchalantly instead of approaching the subject directly.

“You’re going to be a Keikain maid, right, Ichijou-kun? You’re not working at Keika Holdings where your father is a director?”

“Correct. To be precise, I’ll be the personal maid and secretary of Keikain Runa-sama, the mistress, instead of a resident maid in the house. My lady tells me I’m the third person she’s personally scouted, including my father.”

“Does that mean she scouted CEO Ichijou when she’d only just entered

elementary school?!”

Professor Kanbe began to calculate whether she might have still been in kindergarten at that point. This meant that, even as a brand-new elementary student, she was intelligent enough to headhunt a leader like that. At that moment, Professor Kanbe became confident that the rumors of “Her Little Majesty” running throughout the political and financial worlds were, in fact, completely true.

In other words, this confirmed that the major zaibatsu, the Keika Group, was being led by that grade-schooler. But one could also say that the professor had found the one genius of his research whom he believed was worth the sacrifice of a million others.

“Ichijou-kun, if you ever need advice, I’ll help you as much as I possibly can. So, when you’re able, could you tell me everything about your mistress that you’re allowed to?”

Professor Kanbe didn’t even notice that his hands were shaking with enough excitement to rattle his plate, but Ichijou Erika didn’t spot it either. Instead, she delivered a casual bombshell.

“Why don’t you ask her directly? It sounds like she made some time to come here.”

The professor dropped his knife and fork on the floor. The maids swiped them up without getting in the diners’ way, but Professor Kanbe remained frozen.

Ichijou Erika, without any thought or consideration for the mood, made an announcement that stirred up the room. “I know the party’s just getting started, but please allow me to introduce someone. Our guest of honor is the Keikain mistress who reduced the price of the hotel and food in exchange for the chance to speak briefly. Please welcome Keikain Runa-sama!”

Adhering to decorum, the maids formed a neat line to greet their mistress and opened the door for her. The students and Professor Kanbe, who knew how to read the room, froze up completely.

“Huh? Isn’t this the type of thing where everyone gets excited and claps?”

Once Ichijou Erika handed her the microphone, Keikain Runa’s first words

made everyone burst into laughter and applause. Seeing that the room had finally relaxed, Keikain Runa began to introduce herself.

“Hello to everyone in the Kanbe Seminar. Congratulations on your graduation. Many of you are embarking on new paths where you may even encounter us at the Keika Group. I look forward to our future dealings.”

Keikain Runa bowed her head cutely, sending her beautiful blonde hair fluttering through the air. Applause rang out once more before she continued.

“I’ve had the opportunity to read Professor Kanbe’s books and papers. The theory that one genius outweighs a million prodigies probably applies to a world I’ll come to see with my own eyes, and there’s part of it that I can’t ignore, so I’m thrilled to be meeting you for the first time tonight. However, those million prodigies will never be without value. At the very least, I understand that the Keika Group wouldn’t be able to function without those million prodigies.”

She spoke persuasively for an elementary school student. For Professor Kanbe, it was a plain display of her peculiarity.

“Besides, without so many prodigies and other people, society itself wouldn’t function. Take care of yourselves, and even if you end up as cogs in the wheels of companies and societies, you’ll still have your determination. Please don’t forget that. I believe that the Keika Group’s mission is to work hard so that all of you can be accepted. I’ve been brief, but that’s all I would like to say for my introduction. Thank you for having me here today.”

Keikain Runa bowed her head once more, receiving thunderous applause this time. When she raised her head again, Professor Kanbe saw a smile that he would never forget.

Kudanshita was a neighborhood in Chiyoda, Tokyo. There was a skyscraper there in the final stages of construction called “Kudanshita Keika Tower.” The exterior was just about finished, and the interior’s final touches were being built. This building was going to become Ichijou Erika’s workplace. She arrived at the job, changed into her maid uniform, and headed to the morning meeting.

“Good morning,” Nagamori Kaori, the boss at this site, greeted them.

“Good morning!” Ichijou Erika and the other maids replied in unison.

Kudanshita Keika Tower already served as a location for the rapidly growing Keika Group to train employees. The only other active operation inside was the Moonlight Fund, often called the core of the Keika Group.

There were just under forty maids in the room. Ichijou Erika was impressed by how their voices sounded in unison. There were roughly seventy maids in total, but they never vocalized in perfect unison when they were together. Some were already out at their posts or resting as part of their four-shift rotation. That was why this morning meeting occurred every day without fail, so the maids could confirm who was going to take over and when.

“Let us begin the morning assembly.”

Nagamori Kaori was twenty-seven years old, married and mother of a two-year-old child. She worked as a maid at the Shinjuku Keika Hotel and had been selected to transfer to the Kudanshita Keika Hotel once it was completed in the fall. Her job wasn’t just to train the other maids, she was also expected to be a buffer for the large, diverse group.

“Who is on Den-en-chofu duty today?”

“That would be us!”

A few maids called out and raised their hands. Some were Japanese, but others looked to have Russian facial features. The maids here all had slightly different posts and duties:

Runa-sama’s personal maids (care/protection):

Roughly fifty maids

Keika Hotel maid service: A few maids

Café Vesuna workers: Roughly twenty maids

The duties of the maids working for the building's owner, Runa, probably didn't require much explanation, but everyone in the room knew that the majority of them were armed bodyguards dispatched from Kitakaba Security.

Vesuna was the cafe that would open on the first floor of the building. It was also mainly staffed by Kitakaba employees, but upon falling in love with the sight of the maids working there, some women came from Akihabara just to become maids there. Bringing them together was another part of Nagamori Kaori's job.

Her main role was to work as a hotel maid, which would put her under the rank of a concierge; however, she specialized in serving guests such as nobles and foreign aristocrats. Most of her work consisted of starting up the maid division in Kudanshita Keika Hotel, which was a reception hall for the Keika Group, and ensuring proper training for those maids.

"Once we're done here, head out to your posts and change shifts. Please say hello to the head maid for me too."

This rapidly expanding group were all Keikan maids, but to put it more accurately, they were all the personal maids of Keikain Runa.

Her original maids—Saitou Keiko, Tokitou Aki, and Katsura Naomi—had received promotions to head maid and assistant head maids. Nagamori Kaoru was next in line as the educator and manager of the many new women.

Keikain Runa was currently at her manor in Den-en-chofu, so the maids who would join her and make up the four shifts first gathered in Kudanshita before heading to Den-en-chofu to take over for the afternoon.

"The head maid will arrive later today, so the two of us will begin our shift then. Please report to us if anything comes up. Ichijou-san, may I have Runa-sama's schedule?"

Ichijou retrieved the note that she was asked for.

“This is her schedule for today. She’ll be home from school around 6 p.m., eat dinner, and have some free time from 9 to 10 p.m. She has asked us to come to her then if there’s anything we need her permission for.”

Nagamori Kaoru was the one who trained Ichijou Erika, the woman directly scouted by Runa to be both a maid and secretary. Erika may have been an airhead, but she wasn’t an idiot, so she knew how to get her job done. Little did she know that she’d been assigned to work with Saitou Keiko due to the opportunities that might come her way regarding her dream to get married and retire.

“These are today’s guard shifts. Refer to Plan A in your crisis response manuals should you find yourself in an emergency.”

Everyone stood up straight together and made their shoes squeak against the floor in unison. They seemed to have picked up this habit naturally, perhaps because so many of them had military experience. Nagamori Kaoru saw it as a signal to wrap up.

“Let’s do a great job today, and remember, safety first!”

“Yes! Safety first!”

“Nagamori-san, isn’t that what they say in the manufacturing industry?”

“That’s correct, Ichijou-san. Runa-sama found that phrase amusing when she learned it from a guest. It’s no problem as long as there’re no accidents or trouble, right?”

Ichijou Erika arrived at the open-air garden on the top floor of Kudanshita Keika Tower. Dressed in her maid uniform, she gazed at her surroundings.

The roof could be opened and closed manually. Underneath it, there was already a layer of dirt across the ground with multiple trees planted throughout. The open-air garden was unique in that it allowed for certain trees with shallower, more widespread roots to grow. Deep-rooted trees required much more soil to grow without withering, and they were also a heavier burden to handle.

An elegant pond sat underneath the trees swaying in the breeze of the building. There were aquatic plants like lotus flowers and reeds growing around it. As part of a rooftop garden, the pond water was uniquely shallow—water was heavy too, after all.

She played with some of the soil under her feet.

“Ah, so it’s vermiculite.”

The garden used soil that was one tenth of the weight of water. They were definitely trying to limit the weight burden. It was easy to picture how taxing the struggles and compromises must have been for the building and garden designers. They were surely cradling their heads in anguish over the young lady’s whims.

This unique garden was none other than Ichijou Erika’s workplace. She stood up, smiled wryly, and grumbled to herself.

“No one told me this was going to be over a hundred meters tall...”

The higher the elevation, the cooler the temperature. Being on a skyscraper wasn’t unlike standing on a small mountain.

“All right. I’m going to make a garden that my lady will just love. I wonder if I’m really the best person to be in charge of this...”

Ichijou Erika didn’t know any of the technical skills, but she was honest enough to go to a professional when she needed help. She would consult professional gardeners to decide what kinds of flowers to plant there.

Even though she was employed as a maid and secretary, there were also professionals there to do those tasks, and there was nothing left that required her help. But the young lady still invited her to tea, where Ichijou Erika listened to her stories, answered back to her, and laughed with her. That was Ichijou Erika’s job.

“Oh well. I’ll marry out of this job at some point, so this garden can be my parting gift to my lady!”

With that, Ichijou Erika adjusted the rocks and dirt, not caring if her outfit got dirty.

The open-air garden on the top floor of Kudanshita Keika Tower would later become Keikain Runa's favorite place, and she would call it "Erika's Garden" in honor of the woman who took care of it. Only those close to her were allowed to enter.

Glossary and Notes

Hibachi: An above-ground basin placed in a garden when creating a biotope so that you don't have to dig out a pond. It's larger and more stylish than a water tank or bucket, making it a commonly used item.

Suit and watch: Dressing in a nice suit and watch is a way of altering reality, allowing people of this time period to receive effects such as extra peace of mind.

Safety first (Goanzen ni): Supposedly, the first company to use this phrase was Sumitomo Metal Industries.

Chapter 2:

Keikain Runa's Birthday

“GOOD MORNING, my lady. The weather is lovely today.”

When I opened my eyes, I was met with the face of Tokitou Aki-san, my assistant head maid. I returned the greeting, although I still felt tired.

“Good morning, Aki-san.”

I changed out of my pajamas and into my uniform and prepared for the rest of the day.

I was reaching the age where girls tend to develop an interest in fashion, but since I was still just an elementary school student, all I could do was slightly change up my handkerchief or hair accessories. However, they were still all made-to-order goods from Teisei Department Store.

“Good morning, my lady.”

“Good morning, Anisha.”

On my way to the dining room, I passed my new maid, Anisha Egorova. Tachibana told me that she was more of an observer than a maid since she worked for an Eastern intelligence agency. Including myself, there had been only a few people here

in the house until my recent hiring of more than ten maids and servants. The building was quite crowded now. As a result, the three maids who had been with me from the start—Keiko-san, Aki-san, and Naomi-san—each received promotions. The neighbors all began to gossip about the return of so much activity to my home.

“Good morning, my lady. About today's schedule...”

Angela Sullivan, the woman who had come here to serve as my secretary, was seated at the breakfast table while looking over my schedule. Angela was a former CIA agent. She never dined here at the table under any circumstances.

“Why do you eat alongside your mistress? Masters and servants are supposed to eat separately!”

“So you want her to eat all her meals in total solitude?!”

The big fight caused by this culture gap was resolved with a compromise. Tachibana Ryuuji, my butler; Tachibana Yuka, his granddaughter; Keiko-san, my head maid; Naomi-san, my assistant head maid; and Aki-san, who held the same title as Naomi-san, all dined with me as usual, since they had been working in this house from the start. The newbies, Angela Sullivan and Anisha Egorova, joined us in the dining room without eating.

“Thank you for this meal,” I said.

“Thank you for this meal!” they chorused in perfect unison, and we all began to eat breakfast. Today, it was only Keiko-san, Aki-san, Tachibana Yuka, and one other dining with me. Tachibana, my butler, hadn’t been around lately since he was busy as the CEO of the newly formed Keika Railway.

Then there were Angela and Anisha. Both women refused to look the other in the eye. I knew that Angela’s presence had to be one of the reasons why Anisha decided to come work here.

“I’m so glad that we have a cook here to take some work off our hands in the mornings!”

The speaker, who was enjoying her breakfast without a care in the world, was Ichijou Erika, the daughter of Keika Holdings’ CEO who had joined us as a maid this spring. Even as a newbie, she didn’t see the point in eating separately from me.

“But I’ll be lonely if I have to go eat somewhere all by myself,” she’d said, carving out a spot for herself at our table with her middle-class Japanese instincts. She was a bit of an airhead, but I’d scouted her because I admired her so deeply. I even put her in charge of upkeep for my home garden, as well as the open-air garden I would be establishing on the Kudanshita building once construction was finished.

“Have a wonderful day, my lady.”

“See you soon.”

I bid them farewell and entered the car. I now had a special driver for the cars that Tachibana had formerly transported me in.

“How beautiful is this weather? On days like this, I always feel like holding a concert on the sidewalk.”

“That sounds lovely. May I sing alongside you too?”

“My lady?”

“I’m only kidding. Please don’t take these things so seriously, Angela.”

The conversation inside of the car was somewhat lively. Today’s driver was Watabe Shigema, a former violinist who used to perform outside of the entrance to a Teisei Department Store. Tachibana had apparently scouted him after I took a liking to his music and joined him in a duet.

He was helping me out when I practiced my music too. According to a member of the Teia Philharmonic, with which I performed for classical concerts, he used to be quite famous.

Watabe-san even asked me if I would like to perform with him sometime.

My other drivers were Sone Mitsukane-san and Akanezawa Saburou-san, but they were employed by the main branch of the Keikain family.

“By the way, Angela, isn’t the Kudanshita building nearly finished already?”

“It sounds like it’s almost there. Since it will be the true headquarters of the Keika Group, I’m told that the staff is finishing up the interior right now. I think you’ll be able to move in at some point during summer vacation.”

The building, which would be called Kudanshita Keika Tower, was being made into a sort of home base for the Keika Group after we redeveloped and expanded the building that used to house the offices of a credit bank. That was why the Moonlight Fund and my own residence would be moved there too. The only problem was that it would increase my commute time to school, but since I was already going by car, it didn’t matter much to me.

“That reminds me. Your birthday is coming up, right, my lady?”

“Indeed. I plan on having one party at the Shinjuku Keika Hotel and another just for those close to me. I already hand-wrote the invitations.”

“Please let me know the venue and guest list later. I want to be sure it’s properly guarded.”

“Of course, of course.”

We arrived at the Imperial Gakushuukan Academy during the course of this conversation. The car came to a halt in the parking lot as my door was opened for me.

“All right, I’ll be on my way.”

“Have a good day, my lady.”

Many people came to say hello to me during the trip from the parking lot to the school building.

“Morning, Runa-chan!” they said with bows.

“Good morning, Runa-oneesama.”

The first three who came up to me were my friends from kindergarten: Kasugano Asuka, Kaihouin Hotaru, and Amane Mio. We had all become like sisters before any of us even noticed it. Even after they learned of my circumstances in life, they stayed friendly with me and never showed any fear toward me. That was how we grew so close.

Asuka-chan had the personality of a spirited leader. She and I usually took turns serving as class representative. Hotaru-chan was the classic Japanese beauty who generally didn’t speak; when she did talk, it was only a slight whisper. Mio-chan was like a precious little sister. She usually stayed behind me, but she liked to jump in when she had something to say.

“Did you see that TV show last night?”

“What show, Asuka-chan?”

“The anime. The one they don’t show in Ehime.”

Hotaru-chan and Mio-chan cocked their heads. Next to them, I clapped my hands together.

It was easy to forget this sort of thing when you lived in Tokyo, but despite the national use of the internet, there were still channels that weren’t available

in certain regions. It was the golden age of TV, so not watching shows basically put you out of the loop for the next day's discussions. This was a very big problem for Asuka-chan, who lived in Ehime prefecture, but luckily, she could catch up on video.

"Good morning, Runa-san."

"Good morning, Kaoru-san."

The next person who came to greet me was Asagiri Kaoru-san. She was the little sister of my brother's fiancée and had a family connection to the Iwazaki zaibatsu.

From behind her, I also received smiles and bows from Kazuki Shiori-san, Machiyoi Sanae-san, Kurimori Shizuka-san, and Takahashi Akiko-san. I returned the gesture.

Kazuki Shiori-san belonged to a branch family of the Keikains. In terms of family status, she was around the same level as me when I first started out, or perhaps a bit higher. Shiori-san's father was the current viscount of the Kazuki family, while her mother was the daughter of my grandfather and his wife. In the otome game, her name came up as a follower of mine, though she would eventually betray me.

I'd intentionally distanced myself from her because of what I knew, so I had to wonder why she was coming up to talk with me like this.

As for the other three, Sanae-san was a daughter of Count Machiyoi and a fan of singing. She had her friend Kaoru-san introduce me to her so that we could discuss music together. Kurimori-san was the daughter of a regional zaibatsu head who used Keika Bank as their main financial partner, so it was hard for me to dislike her habit of flattering me as much as she could. Takahashi-san's father was supposedly an acquaintance of Tachibana and a high-ranking police official.

"Good morning, Lydia-senpai."

"Morning, Keikain-san. Funny seeing you here."

Shizuka Lydia-senpai had a habit of pretending it was a coincidence that we saw each other at the same time each day. She didn't seem to have any friends in her grade; she was often alone when I saw her. She also hailed from Karafuto

and was a national traitor in the sense that her father was a high-ranking official of what used to be Northern Japan.

I was sure that she must have been comfortable interacting with me because I was also treated as a traitor due to my father's missteps.

"Good morning, Takamiya-sensei."

"Good morning, Keikain-san."

Takamiya Haruka-sensei, the Imperial Gakushuukan Academy's central library manager, was apparently out on greeting duty today. She had served as the head of our school's library for a long time now and many of the students were intensely fond of her.

I arrived at my classroom and Teia Eiichi-kun, Izumikawa Yuujirou-kun, and Gotou Mitsuya-kun turned to greet me.

"Morning, Runa."

"Good morning, Keikain-san."

"Morning, Keikain."

"Morning, everyone."

Thus began my school day. I knew I needed to hand out the birthday invitations I'd written.

"Oh, she's here, she's here!"

"Sorry for the wait!"

"We just got here too."

I had rented out our favorite café, Avanti, as the venue for my birthday party. Birthday events for nobility or zaibatsu generally turned into political affairs, which was why I wanted to have my own private party for friends before that one. This was what I'd handed out invitations for.

The male guests included Eiichi-kun, Yuujirou-kun, and Mitsuya-kun. Then there were my almost-sisters: Asuka-chan, Hotaru-chan, and Mio-chan. I also invited Kaoru-san, Kazuki-san, Machiyoi-san, Kurimori-san, Takahashi-san, and

Lydia-senpai.

Since this was quite a large party, in addition to renting out the café, I also had Aki-san, Ichijou Erika-san, and Tachibana Yuka-san working as temporary maids.

“Happy birthday!” they chorused.

“Thanks, everyone!”

With that, the party began. The first snack set out on the table was the aloe yogurt that had been so popular lately. There were sprigs of mint leaves on top as an eye-catching decoration.

“I really love this texture.”

“It’s supposed to be good for your skin and health too.”

All the girls lit up when they heard that, including the three maids.

The maids carried in my birthday cakes next.

“So the cakes are that truffle chocolate kind with whipped cream and strawberries that Runa loves?”

“I asked for Keikain’s favorites, since it’s her birthday.”

“Well, it’s Keikain-san’s special day, so she should eat as much as she wants.”

Everyone’s eyes wandered to beside of the cake.

There was freshly fried karaage, spaghetti Napolitana, chicken salad, and curry with rice.

“Can you...really finish all of that?”

“Of course. But if we don’t, I’ll take it home with me. We don’t want to waste it.”

I answered Eiichi-kun’s remark casually, though I saw that overwhelmed look in Yuujirou-kun’s eyes. This was a cultural idea brought in from the European continent. The upper classes would order a large amount of food, then give the rest to their servants if they couldn’t finish it themselves. This clashed with Japan’s time-honored tradition of refusing to waste anything, though. I decided to just ignore the way it was used as a criticism against nobility.



“To be more accurate, I’ll let the workers at my home have the rest of it. It’s like a bonus for my maids and houseworkers.”

Kaoru-san understood this concept and quickly backed me up on it. At times like these, I was so glad the two of us had become friends.

“Oh, by the way, here’s your present.”

“Thank you, Kaoru-san! Can I open it now?”

“Go ahead.”

I made sure it was public knowledge that I generally only accepted inexpensive gifts. But such a requirement was impossible when it came to nobles, who always presented me with the finest of goods. Kaoru-san’s family would be giving me a gift at my formal party, so I knew this had to be something she picked out herself.

Kaoru-san’s present turned out to be a sunstone necklace with a beautiful, faint orange hue reflected in the light. It only cost around 10,000 yen, although that amount could vary greatly depending on the family it came from.

“Thank you! I’ll treasure this necklace.”

“Here, this is our present.”

“Thanks, Asuka-chan, Hotaru-chan, and Mio-chan!”

My next present came from my almost-sisters. I unwrapped the small gift to reveal a tiny charm inside a bag. I lifted it up to my face and caught the faint scent of mandarins.

“Mio-chan made the bag, I provided the orange perfume, and Hotaru-chan made the charm by hand.”

“Right, right. This sort of thing is great. Thanks, you three. By the way, what does the charm bring?”

Hotaru-chan just grinned.

Asuka-chan and Mio-chan both looked away from Hotaru-chan’s big smile. *Ah, of course. Hotaru-chan would definitely have given it some kind of blessing, I think.*

“We all picked this out together. Happy birthday!”

“Thanks, everyone. Can I open it?”

Kazuki-san, Machiyoi-san, Kurimori-san, and Takahashi-san had gifted me a stuffed animal representing a character from a video game.

When I hugged the yellow, mouse-like creature, Takahashi-san gave me an explanation.

“We didn’t think you would have this already, Keikain-san, and it’s the only thing we could think of that we could get our hands on. We all worked really hard for this.”

Worked hard for it? I cocked my head and looked at the manufacturer’s name. That was when I figured it out. This stuffed animal was a prize from a crane game. Kazuki-san and Machiyoi-san didn’t seem like the types to go to arcades, so I wondered whether the idea for this present came from Kurimori-san or Takahashi-san.

“I’ll take good care of him.”

“Okay, I’m next. Here you go.”

“Thank you very much, Lydia-senpai. I’ll open it now.”

Lydia-senpai had given me a music box. When opened, it played the “Waltz of the Flowers” from *The Nutcracker* while a little ballerina inside danced to the tune.

“I’m going to cherish this, Senpai.”

“I’m just glad you like it.”

Today, she was honest about the way my praise made her feel. I only wished she could be like this all the time.

“This is from all of us. Here.”

Eiichi-kun spoke for the three boys as he handed me a present.

I thanked him with a smile, opened the box, and took out a fountain pen.

“You’ve got all these new opportunities to autograph things, so the three of us managed to get this for you.”

“Thank you! I’m going to have a chance to sign things soon, so I’ll be able to use this in the near future.”

I knew it cost about 30,000 yen. They really hadn’t held back.

“Keikain, if you’re gonna be in the spotlight enough to use that, then you must have big plans.”

I smiled awkwardly at Eiichi-kun’s change of topic. Even though this was a gathering of elementary schoolers, politics still came up in our discussions.

“Yes. I want to go tit-for-tat and construct a Shinjuku Shinkansen.”

My casual reveal of this goal made everyone fall silent. Apparently, they already knew of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy’s stance on shinkansen construction since it had made the news. But at any rate, it was a massive project with a construction cost of one trillion yen. Governor Iwasawa had expressed his support for our backing of the endeavor.

“It’s the ‘Shinjuku Geofront Project.’ It sounds like he wants to try out a lot of things with this redevelopment of the Shinjuku Station Shinkansen.”

I smiled awkwardly. The truth was that public safety in this country had grown even worse since the bubble burst, and we were just barely managing to keep it in check. The problem of second-class citizens was the focus of public safety measures, which was a now-or-never issue for local governments.

In response to this, the lieutenant governor had directed his city to increase the number of security cameras and policemen. Groups like private security firms, detectives, bounty hunters, and the like had also teamed up to aim for a change in the law, which the city had played up magnificently as a public works project for the city center as well as a job-creating venture. It was their trump card.

“Are you going to end up paying out-of-pocket for that?”

“Since it’s the semi-public sector, we just need the city’s involvement and permission from the national government. It sounds like the railway companies who want to connect to our line are completely on board, though. Our dealings with KYOSHO Rapid Railway and Shin-Tokiwa Railway opened some major doors for us. We’re even going to join up with an IC card company. All in all, we’ve

claimed victory on this end.”

I ate some of my cake as I responded to Eiichi-kun’s question. There were already Tohoku, Jouetsu, Nagano, Yamagata, Akita, and shinkansen lines running to Tokyo, and the processing capacity at Tokyo Station, the terminus, was fully saturated.

We’d completed most of the groundwork during the Hayashi administration, with the only remaining decision being who would provide the funding. If we managed to clear this hurdle, not even Takenaga, Minister of State for Economic and Fiscal Policy, would be able to stop us. Rather than proclaiming that we’d already won, perhaps it was more accurate to say that I was eagerly awaiting his next step.

“That man can make everyone do all sorts of things. Be careful of him too, Keikain-san.”

Yuujiro-kun, whose father was currently caught up in just such a situation, spoke with the gravity of maturity.

“Right. I know.”

These weren’t the best topics for a party. Between all the conversations and smiles of my guests, time passed more quickly than I expected.

“I had a lot of fun.”

“Thanks for inviting us, Runa-san.”

“Whose birthday is next?”

“That would be me.”

“Then let’s have another party here when your birthday’s closer!”

“Sounds good to me.”

“No objections!”

With that, we all parted ways. I got into the car that had arrived to pick me up and found that Tachibana and Angela had placed a small box for me inside.

“This is a present from us.”

I opened it up and found a bottle of perfume—a very expensive brand, of

course.

“Someday, you’ll grow up to be the kind of young lady a fragrance like this is meant for. But until that day, we will stay here by your side.”

“All right, then. It’s a promise.”

I stuck my pinky out for Tachibana, who smiled shyly and linked fingers with me.

How I wished that days like this would last forever, even if I knew such a wish would never come true.

The party at the Shinjuku Keika Hotel was for my birthday, but it had turned into a showy affair with so many politicians, business figures, and ambassadors invited. My plan was to build another Keika Hotel in Kudanshita where such formal parties and receptions would take place from then on, allowing for the Shinjuku hotel to be remodeled. Even though there were so many important people from the worlds of business and politics there on the top floor, not one of them was discussing anything related to me.

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is losing its mind over the government’s private funding scandal.”

“The Privy Council is trying to dig up dirt about the situation through the nobility, but apparently the secretary-general isn’t acting discreetly at all and he’s getting in their way.”

“And Prime Minister Koizumi is leaving it all in the secretary-general’s hands. He put Minister Takenaga in charge of all the economic issues, like eliminating bad debts, so maybe that’s just the way this cabinet’s going to be.”

They were discussing Prime Minister Koizumi, the man whose incredibly high approval ratings allowed him to act without much thought.

The current scandal rocking the political world—the diversion of secret funds from the prime minister’s office to members of the nobility—was originally a way of providing relief to the imperial court by means of “blue blood negotiations.”

The strategy was to have nobles take on the roles of ambassadors and diplomats while foreign affairs officials carried out the actual work underneath them. They also had influence on the Privy Council, a gathering of nobles, and used it to promote the excuse that the country was refusing to shift the balance of diplomacy.

In reality, those doing the actual work used the puppet ambassadors and diplomats as shields so they could do anything they wanted and shove the blame for their own misdeeds on those nobles with government jobs. But their own special protections got in the way, and the whole situation turned into a spiral of corruption.

But the fatal wound was that each successive cabinet had been eagerly gathering up money in the form of a secret slush fund, conveniently allowing the government heads to pay workers at their residences without having to disclose the source of the cash.

The public was enraged. You could say that it was only natural for them to cheer on the secretary-general when he got to the bottom of things, but the Minister of Foreign Affairs was caught between his own ministry, the Privy Council, and the public, which prevented the system from functioning. Prime Minister Koizumi, of course, was remaining neutral with the summer House of Councilors election coming up, so he refused to meddle in the matter.

“Thank god Izumikawa-san stayed on.”

“It may have been bad luck that he was forced into the role of prime minister while the caretaker government was in power, but considering the history of deputy prime ministers, he probably wouldn’t have thought he’d have so much influence.”

“And that’s exactly why that bill came to be.”

The Deputy Prime Minister Installation Act.

Many laws had been amended, starting with the Cabinet Act, but this much-debated ordinance was a way of making the deputy prime minister job more official by adding parliamentary officials and aides to serve them. This increased the number of minister chairs for dietmen to sit in, but it also made it clear that the Chief Cabinet Secretary would act as proxy of the prime minister if anything

happened to him. It was hard to see it as anything other than a way of removing responsibilities from the deputy prime minister.

I first thought that this was clearly influenced by the United States, but it also made the deputy prime minister serve concurrently as the chairman of the Privy Council. Prime ministers were customarily given noble titles, so I figured that Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa wanted to get the Privy Council under his control through the title he earned as prime minister, as well as his current roles as deputy prime minister and chairman of the Privy Council.

Procedures would be carried out by the vice chairman if this were the United States, but Prime Minister Koizumi used this secret funding scandal to criticize the zaibatsu and their close-knit noble families, tried to control the Privy Council through the deputy prime minister, and curtailed the influence that Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa was amassing. The prime minister was truly a political demon.

In addition, the vice president had quickly started meddling with party rules to make them more permanent.

“I’ll bet the bad debt situation is really going to get cleared up now.”

“Minister Takenaga is definitely motivated.”

“The next targets have to be Gowa Osan Bank and Honami Bank.”

Commercial Bank of Japan, Fuyou Bank, and DK Bank had merged to form the giant Honami Bank, although their inner affairs still weren’t settled. The former Gowa Bank, which was based in Osaka, and Osan Bank, headquartered in Nagoya, had merged to form Gowa Osan Bank, but they shared a weakness because their foundation in the Kanto region lacked power.

As a result, the much-prayed-for rains that fell on the megabanks in the form of Russian bonds leaked from Japanese syndication, which delayed the process of handling bad loans. This was what Minister Takenaga would most likely have in his sights.

The data on bad loans currently looked like this:

Financial recovery disclosure (the stuff the banks were prepared to crush):

10.8 trillion yen

Risk management claims (the scary stuff):

38.4 trillion yen

Financial institution funds for troubled companies (problematic loans, including the two categories above):

90 trillion yen

...I want to cry. But the economic situation is still better than it was in my past life.

Most ordinary people would be thinking about the last number there, but financial institutions were only ready to pay about 11 trillion yen. The real problem was subtracting that top number from the middle one and dealing with the remaining roughly 28 trillion yen. Minister Takenaga was planning to handle it by injecting public funds into those financial institutions.

This was how he planned to do it: the 28 trillion yen that remained after subtracting the financial recovery disclosures from the risk management claims would be more thoroughly reviewed by the Financial Services Agency. They would then order the banks to appropriate the reserves needed to pay back these debts with their credit. It was certainly a good thing that they could legally give orders to financial institutions regarding bad debt disposal, at the very least.

Once they appropriated that amount of money for their massive 28 trillion in debt, the banks would suffer huge losses and be driven to collapse. That wasn't what anyone wanted, so the government would then prepare roughly 80 trillion yen of public funds to nationalize the failing institutions.

These laws were already established, and it wasn't as if any bank *wanted* to fail, so they managed to just barely make it through by normalizing their credit and increasing capital in any way possible.

This excluded Keika Holdings, which was already nationalized and had almost no credits from the others.

Keika Holdings may not have appeared to be connected to this process at the time, but it was predicted that one of our two banks would go running there for help, be subjected to a rigorous investigation, experience an explosion of bad debts, and end up nationalized through an injection of public funds.

“My lady, it’s just about time.”

Angela, my secretary, prompted me to leave the waiting room.

Outfit, check.

Smile, check.

Energy, check.

I gave my cheeks a light slap and exited the powder room. I was wearing a princess dress provided by Teisei Department Stores, since my request to simply wear my school uniform had been rejected.

“Presenting Keikain Runa-sama of the Keikain Dukedom.”

I entered the hall to a chorus of applause and bowed to the audience. I thanked them by performing a song.

Watabe Shigema-san, the violinist I’d met in front of Teisei Department Store, led the orchestra in producing a wondrous sound throughout the room. Once the guests were good and charmed, I introduced myself to the crowd. I put a smile on my face and greeted the partygoers through the nonstop applause.

Some guests in military uniforms stood out in particular. The Desert Hero was attending alongside the CEO of a private military company (PMC) at his public debut, and they brought officers of the USFJ and JSDF with them.

The United States was currently taking a hard stance against Communist China due to the friendly fire episode at the Chinese embassy during the Yugoslav War and the Hainan Island Incident in which American and Chinese planes had collided. It felt like they were here to interfere in Japan’s business since our politics seemed to be in such disarray, even if they could publicly write it off as mere support from an allied nation.

“Thank you all for attending my birthday party today. This banquet may be modest, but I hope you’ll all enjoy yourselves.”

After this introduction, important guests came up to greet me in order. Today’s most prominent guest was the United States Deputy Secretary of State, who had come here just for my party. The public reason given for his visit was to engage in discussions with the Japanese government, but his attendance at my birthday party must have meant that the United States had me under heavy surveillance. The Deputy Secretary came to shake my hand, alongside the US ambassador and a general from the USFJ.

“Happy birthday, Miss Keikain. The president sent me here with a birthday card for you, so I’ll give it to you later.”

“Thank you for coming all this way. Please give my best to the president.”

That was how the interactions started. The next guests to line up were ambassadors from many countries, followed by zaibatsu officials and nobles. Annoyingly, the whole greeting process took half an hour from start to finish.

“I apologize for interrupting the party, but my lady has grown fatigued, so she’ll be taking a brief moment to rest. Please enjoy the festivities in her absence.”

Watabe-san, the event’s host, made this announcement and retreated from the party with me. Taking a rest in the waiting room was an excuse to meet with a set of important guests. While I relaxed there, the Deputy Secretary of State from before entered. The stuffy conversation was also joined by Tachibana, Angela the ex-CIA agent, and Eva, the active CIA agent who had come here through Angela in the role of a maid.

“Miss Keikain, we greatly appreciate the information you’ve given us. We came here to find the connection between Pakistan and the Taliban, but we never thought they’d move in plain sight like this.”

These kinds of discussions were always a mixture of truth and fiction, so it was hard to tell whether he was being honest or giving me undeserved credit. However, I had no intention of letting this situation escape me.

“I’m glad to be of help. Regarding the purchase of weapons for Afghanistan

under the guise of supplies to rebuild after the Gujarat earthquake, it sounds as if the Pakistani military authorities are now significantly stronger. As a private company, we're unable to play much of a part. Do you know of the circumstances that led to this?"

He stared at me silently, closed his eyes, and let out a sigh.

"This is off the record, okay? There was a conflict called the Kargil War that broke out on the border of India and Pakistan in '99. Pakistan couldn't help but throw in the towel after pressure from international society."

I was speechless. I didn't know any of that at all. *Hang on. Speaking of 1999...*

"They were already doing nuclear tests at that point, if I remember correctly."

"Pakistan's nuclear tests were in May of 1998. Many countries were quietly preparing for a possible nuclear war. Pakistan still had no choice but to strengthen their military, or else the mujahideen they'd helped raise would never agree to go along."

Nuclear weapons were most effective when they were used as a threat. Now that India and Pakistan had achieved mutually assured destruction, they were forced to exist in a Cold War situation that the mujahideen didn't comprehend, and the Pakistani military couldn't control them.

"Any spark on the border could light the flames of nuclear war and, right now, the country that can intervene is Afghanistan. Our current stance is against the armed Afghan insurgents, but it's by no means a forgiving situation."

The mujahideen had become anti-American after the Gulf War and began to target them with terrorist attacks.

These insurgents, who were protecting the mujahideen with the support of Pakistani military groups, once grew to control 95 percent of Afghanistan territory. The remaining forces were still being pushed back in counterattacks, but these insurgent groups still had power over a majority of the country.

"Please don't tell me that the United States is only interacting with the Pakistani government. Don't you have any channels with the military groups or insurgents?"

The Deputy Secretary of State said nothing.

Come on, now. Speak up. His silence told me everything.

That sounds about right. During the Cold War, there were regulations for delivering orders from allied leaders of major countries, but that was ancient history now.

The Pakistani government was unable to control its military groups, which in turn could not regulate the insurgents they'd helped create. This difference in perception would later be connected to my downfall.

"In other words, one reason you came to this party was to ask us to open channels with them through their contact with Akamatsu Corporation?"

"I knew someone as wise as you would reach that conclusion. We have every intention of expressing our gratitude."

I sighed, but I still agreed to the request. At the very least, both the US and I would reap the same benefits for the time being.

"We'll provide humanitarian aid such as food and medical supplies, but not weapons and ammunition. Eva will report on all the details. We'll make it known that Akamatsu Corporation's refusal is due to pressure from the United States Government. That should do it, shouldn't it?"

"I greatly appreciate your wisdom, my lady."

I decided not to respond to his expression of gratitude. My answer to him would come in autumn.

"While I have you, allow me to confirm something else as well. The goods supplied to the Indian government include weapons and ammo just as Pakistan's do, of course, but it seems as though theirs are being sent to the Himalayan mountains. Do you know anything about this?"

Both the Deputy Secretary of State and Eva, the active CIA agent, fell silent. I knew what that meant.

"Nepal and Japan share a friendly relationship. I'm sure you aren't thinking of overthrowing the system there in any sort of undemocratic matter, right?"

Nepal, which engaged in royal diplomacy, was treasured by the Japanese

nobles as a work destination. Located between India and Communist China, Nepal was forced to play a diplomatic role whether it liked it or not.

Just as Pakistan couldn't play with fire on the Indian border, India had to behave just as carefully. Also, Pakistan and China made for a good team in opposing India. Not only were they at the mercy of massive countries, but Japan had some responsibility too as an influential nation in the region.

"What are your thoughts on how to oppose China?"

"That will be decided by the Manchurian people."

Manchuria had enacted their first-ever regime change in 2000, which strengthened the country's push for independence. On top of that, Eastern Russia had lost its military power during the Russian financial crisis, and America had taken a harder line with China after the Hainan Island Incident. There was certainly a chance of Manchurian independence on the horizon.

The deputy secretary probably had no choice but to dodge my question.

"I'll handle India in the same way I handle Pakistan. Does that sound satisfactory?"

"I greatly appreciate your wisdom, my lady."

This was my second favor of the conversation. I hoped, for both the US and myself, that this debt wouldn't prove to be too high.

The next guests who arrived were also politicians. Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, former Prime Minister Fuchigami, Governor Iwasawa, and my foster father, Keikain Kiyomaro, all cradled their heads when I told them of my chat with the deputy secretary. Of course, having Angela and Eva sitting alongside us was a way of making arrangements for the US in this conversation through the information they would leak.

"Nepal, is that right? We can't just ignore it because it's so small. Their royal family came all the way here to attend the emperor's funeral."

When former Prime Minister Fuchigami, who'd grown a bit thinner from the treatment for his illness, heard what my foster father had to say from the perspective of the Privy Council, he had the same reaction as the others. The

problem involved anti-China measures, and if India or the US were making moves behind the scenes, it would generally be to Japan's benefit.

"However, objecting to the direction of the United States would require that we offer something in exchange. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in hot water right now, so it would be too dangerous to meddle any further in the Manchurian situation."

"This is why we should have set things in motion for independence in the first place."

Governor Iwasawa's grumblings were hindsight. Once something of this sort occurred, Japan always either followed the lead of the United States or chose not to act at all. Though we'd joined the multinational forces during the Gulf War, no one wanted to take on any more military endeavors after the fall of Northern Japan, either.

"Nothing will come of saying things like that now. All we can do is thank Her Little Majesty for the information and try to find whatever solution we can. I'll inform the ambassador to Nepal and use my name to start gathering information. I'll let the prime minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs know as well."

The current Minister for Foreign Affairs was both the first civilian and the first woman to serve in that role. However, with the organization of the ministry rocked by scandal and the minister frantically trying to restructure it, along with the stray bullet that struck the Privy Council, the only action left was for Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa to take emergency measures.

My foster father sighed.

"This is what the secret funds are for in the first place, and yet we can't even use them."

It may have been a slush fund, but the ability to distribute money away from the eyes of others was an extremely powerful weapon. Of course, the recipients of the funds were shady companies that they couldn't pay openly, but not offering money could have fatal consequences for developing countries that lacked public safety.

This scandal would probably clean up the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but the overseas media would have good reason to report on the years of diplomatic struggles which would likely ensue. I spoke up.

“In that case, I have a favor to ask of you all. Please temporarily transfer some people to NPOs. The Akamatsu Corporation will send them to Nepal as overseas workers.”

Moving humans was like leaving hints when it came to battles of information. Just bringing on new people to help gather information was a way of telling the world what we were doing. Things like this would usually be facilitated by slush funds, but that wasn't an option this time.

Japan's general trading companies were sometimes called the country's outside intelligence agencies. That was where I would go to ask for support.

A knock came at the door, and one of the day's main stars entered the room.

“Do you need something from me, Boss?”

I wouldn't have thought that my very first job for the Desert Hero would be something so critical.

I wasn't sure if I should be grateful for my trump card or disappointed that I had to use it right off the bat.

“I have a job for you. I want you to send a team of trained soldiers to Nepal. The client for this job is the Japanese government, but not in an official capacity. Your goal is to collect intelligence and protect the people investigating the political upheaval. By the way, the governments of the United States and India may both be involved in said upheaval. You don't have to harm the Stars and Stripes, but don't let them bring shame to it either. The Japanese government, or rather the old man Izumikawa, says if you make a mess, he'll wipe your butt for you.”

The ex-Desert Hero glanced at the former and current CIA agents, then let out the same sigh as the other four men in the room.

The relationship between the American military and the CIA wasn't exactly peachy.

“This was the kind of mission that really gave me a headache at my last job. Also, Boss, I don’t like hearing a lady talking about wiping asses. But I get it. Tomorrow, I’ll gather up some guys I trust in Sakata.”

Some of the others laughed at his decision to comment on my deliberate choice of expression, but the two CIA members remained unfazed. The Desert Hero seemed to be saying he could get his troops there by plane as soon as tomorrow. I didn’t particularly feel like asking him how he would make that happen.

“All right, men. How much will you pay for this product?”

“Can I get a family discount, Runa?”

My foster father’s question drew more laughter. In a situation like this, I was more interested in being paid with connections than with money. I decided to name my price.

“The Shinjuku Shinkansen.”

Governor Iwasawa, who shared my opinion on the project, was quick to follow up on that comment.

“It’s going to be the main feature of the Shinjuku Geofront, so the city will give its approval immediately. Once you’ve got that, you’ll just need construction permission from the MLIT, not money.”

“I’ll work that out on my end. I may have stepped down from my post and been kicked out of the main party faction, but I still have some influence left. I’ll speak with general contractors too.”

Former Prime Minister Fuchigami was the one who replied. The corruption scandal involving the Foundation for the Development of Small to Medium Sized Companies had come under criminal scrutiny, and the ex-prime minister was only here with us today because he’d fled from the investigation by retiring from the Diet to recover from his illness. But the Tokyo District Public Prosecutor’s Office had been watching him, determined to make him their first victim, up until the party leader election. It would be more accurate to say that he was able to attend *because* the election was over.

“It sounds like the prime minister has no interest in stopping us at the

moment. We've made a fuss about this massive public works project right before the House of Councilors election, so getting in its way would make enemies of the local citizens. I'll use that reasoning to start pressuring Cabinet members from the inside."

Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa patted his chest. The construction of the Shinjuku Shinkansen seemed to be assured.

"That's all I need for payment. Just to confirm once more, what is the plan for encircling the US in their anti-China course? The Nepal issue will come down to that, and I'm sure the Deputy Secretary of State will ask the prime minister about it as well."

Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's frank answer to my question was evidence of how unique this meeting was. This was how he responded on the topic of how to guide the prime minister's office:

"Ask the prime minister."

With that, the business was finished, and it was time to relax in the waiting room.

"This definitely isn't a job that an elementary school kid should be handling."

"Sure, complain about it to us, but what can we do about it?"

I felt reassured to hear Eiichi-kun's blunt response. Having the advantage in shady political chats all came down to whether or not you could understand the implications the other party was making. It was an exhausting feat.

"Oh, I saw that a lot of guests brought kids our age to the party. Don't you want to meet them?"

"I'll pass this time. I have a lot of political restrictions on me, so I'm planning to connect with them by writing thank-you letters."

The type of connections formed in a setting like this, as Yuujirou-kun suggested, began with a greeting and resulted in being invited to the other person's own parties, but that could produce undesirable results in a volatile political and diplomatic situation.

One example would be if two ambassadors or diplomats from opposing

countries attended the same party. One didn't want to be forced to choose between them on the spot, but that could be avoided by sending a thank-you letter for attending your party and have them invite you to theirs when they responded.

"Complain while you can. All we can do for you is listen to what you have to say, after all."

"Having someone I can vent to makes me feel much better. Thanks, Mitsuyakun."

Some food was brought into the waiting room, and I took the opportunity to fill my stomach. Being the star at a party usually meant that you couldn't eat any of the food around you, no matter how much you wanted to.

"There're so many brilliant people here. I'm jealous."

"Would you like to trade places, then?"

"No, thank you."

I was starting to become more comfortable chatting with Kaoru-san. It was quite nice to have friends of the same gender. I also appreciated how she always understood my complaints, since we came from similar backgrounds.

"May I have a moment, my lady?"

Tachibana's voice snapped me back into young lady mode. In times like these, he only ever came to speak with me when there was an emergency. But this time, the emergency was something I'd never even considered.

"I've just received word from the prime minister's office. Prime Minister Koizumi is en route to attend your party."

We definitely would have sent the prime minister an invitation, seeing as how this was my official birthday party.

However, my foster father and the other Keikain staff in the room all became slightly flustered, probably because they never expected him to come to the party of a zaibatsu member—someone he openly opposed.

He was scheduled to arrive when the party was just about over. Unexpectedly showing up at the very end felt like a fitting surprise for Prime Minister Koizumi.

“Please inform the guests that the prime minister will be making an appearance.”

“Also, clean up any food the guests are finished with to make the room presentable.”

“Get the kitchen staff to prepare some simple snacks, since the party will be going long!”

“Quickly, have the guards secure the streets and parking lot!”

As I watched the people behind the scenes erupt into chaos, I knew I had to prepare myself too.

What do I say? What do I tell him? What are people going to think about him coming to meet me like this?

“Sorry, everyone. Could you stand behind me for just a moment, please?”

My voice must have been trembling. Eiichi-kun’s response was wonderfully reassuring.

“Don’t be scared, Runa. We’ll stare him down for you.”

“Pardon the interruption of the festivities, but I’m honored to announce a surprise guest. Presenting Prime Minister Koizumi Souichirou-shi.”

The guests were just as shocked by this development, as the party was very much an event held by and for the anti-Koizumi faction. It was largely attended by zaibatsu members, whose companies the prime minister was publicly eager to dissolve, and the nobles who were under fire due to the slush fund scandal in the Ministry of Public Affairs. I had to admire his guts to come charging in here like this.

“Happy birthday. I’m glad I made it to the party in time.”

“Thank you very much, Prime Minister. I’m happy you decided to attend.”

I smiled and took the bouquet he handed me, feeling the piercing gazes of everyone in the room on us.

“I’m sorry to say that I can’t stay for long. If I ever get the opportunity again,

I'll be sure to attend the event in its entirety."

"Excuse me, Prime Minister. There are a few things I would like to discuss with you..."

I was going to invite him to a private room so that we could discuss what I'd learned from the Deputy Secretary of State, but instead the prime minister gave me a pat on the top of my head. He didn't let me say anything else.

"There's nothing you need to concern yourself with. What comes next is a job for adults."

Until this point, I'd encountered many people who knew about my unique nature. Everyone else tried to use the situation for their benefit, although sometimes they at least apologized for doing so.

But Prime Minister Koizumi was the first person who saw what I was and scolded me for it. *"You're a child, so that's what you have to be."*

Those words shot straight through me like a bullet.

"But that's not possible for me..."

That was what I found myself murmuring out loud after Prime Minister Koizumi had already left. The two of us were to become political opponents, and when I thought about the horrible experiences from my past life that this "actor" was set to bring about, I had to snap myself out of the spell Koizumi Souichirou cast on me.

The next day, news broke about the continuation of the Japanese-US alliance and our stance of cooperation with the Americans, as I'd discussed with the Deputy Secretary of State. He was scheduled to fly straight to Manchuria, but two US Navy aircraft carriers were stationed in the East China and Yellow Seas, and a Maritime Self-Defense Force naval unit was brought in from the Wu region. Tension had been mounting in the Far East, rivaling the unease felt during the downfall of the Northern Japanese government, but a compromise was reached.

The captured American pilot was released and Manchuria made no declaration of independence. As a result, Prime Minister Koizumi's gamble on America paid off, and he earned a diplomatic victory by gaining their trust. His

public support was bolstered significantly.

On the other hand, the PMC I sent to Nepal exposed the careless work being done there, forcing America and India to withdraw. America played dumb in response to the formal protest lodged by the Nepalese government, but it reportedly cost them dearly behind the scenes.



The Indian government was responsible for laying the trap, and the US fell right into it when they tried to save the pilot captured by China. Plus, the entire matter wasn't reported to the people up top, and once it came to light, they'd all rush to shirk responsibility.

I decided to act like I didn't see the big smile on Angela's face when she reported this to me.

Glossary and Notes

Real-life bad debt levels:

Financial recovery disclosure (Sixteen major banks, as of March 2001):
18.0306 trillion yen

Risk management claims (all banks, as of September 2009): 18.0306 trillion yen

Financial institution funds for troubled companies: 150 trillion yen

Other classified credits for all banks combined: 63.935 trillion yen.
Supposedly, they paid off around 100 trillion yen in bad debts.

Source: Tameike Tsuushin, "Kanbei's Irregular Statements." June 20th, 2001.

The song Runa performed: Arai Akino's "Campos Neutros," a B-side from "*Wordsworth no Bouken*."

United States Deputy Secretary of State: Major politicians who were experts on Japan would later write a report with his name on it.

Kargil War: It's said that Pakistan was preparing to use nuclear weapons during this conflict.

Mujahideen: Militia members who are known as Islamic holy warriors. They would later form the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Nepal: That year's assassination of several royal family members would be the trigger that led to the downfall of the Nepalese monarchy.

Chapter 3:

Director Maefuji's Unsolved Case Files

“LET’S HEAR your conditions.”

“I’d like you to look at these photos.”

“Go ahead and show me.”

“This is a sniper from the commonwealth of Chechnya. Now I would like you to look at a photograph of his target. Here she is.”

“This girl will likely become a nuisance to Russia, won’t she? I thought foreign intelligence agencies would be keeping a close eye on her.”

“Indeed. It’s true that there’s a territorial dispute between my homeland and Japan. However, I have no intention of fanning those flames. It may take some time, but may I explain the background of this situation?”

“Very well.”

“It all began when Karafuto was split after the Russo-Japanese War, resulting in the south belonging to Japan and the north belonging to Russia.

“Japan later surrendered to the Allied Nations during the Second World War, declaring war on the Axis powers and

managing to preserve many of their national interests throughout the remainder of the conflict despite their own defeat.

“The secretary general at the time didn’t take that too kindly. When Japan entered the Manchurian War, my country rushed to invade Karafuto and claimed it for ourselves. We forcibly established the People’s Democratic Republic of Northern Japan .

“The Manchurian War ended with the West’s victory, but the Soviet army took the opportunity to invade southern Karafuto, which belonged to Japan, after which the Northern Japanese government was founded.

“It was toward the end of the war when the Soviets held a successful nuclear

test. America managed to defend Manchuria, but they decided to acknowledge the Northern Japanese government to avoid an all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union, and to penalize Japan for their surrender in World War II. This was the cause of the Karafuto Crisis.

“South Karafuto became the People’s Democratic Republic of Northern Japan while North Karafuto became its own autonomous region, but since they were joined together by land and Northern Japan had its own support, the Northern Japanese government was given the role of controlling North Karafuto, putting the whole region under their control up until the fall of the Berlin Wall.”

“The Northern Japanese government was overthrown after the Berlin Wall went down and the territory reverted to Japan, but Russia insists that North Karafuto belongs to them. What’s this sniper got to do with any of that?”

“The first Chechen War started in ’94 and lasted two years. Although we came out victorious, we suffered great losses and were made to look like fools in guerrilla warfare with the Islamic networks. Then the second Chechen War started in ’99, and we Russians are hard at work on our battle plan.

“However, armed Chechen insurgents have taken up guerrilla warfare and Islamic terrorist groups are joining too. We believe that they’re aiming to break the deadlock.”

“And that’s going to light a fire in the East?”

“Certainly. Friction between Japan and Russia will inevitably cause unease in Manchuria, since it’s on the opposite side of the Russian maritime provinces. The United States will be forced to get involved if Communist China acts, and if it reaches that point, NATO’s response will create tension in Europe, spawning battles on three sides. We’ll be unable to focus the entirety of our forces on Chechnya.”

“That’s a pretty big plan for Chechen insurgents to come up with.”

“Islamic fundamentalist groups have been growing more powerful since the Gulf War. I think we should assume that the Chechen insurgents are using them as a model, which would be why they hired a sniper.

“They caused us a lot of pain in Afghanistan, and we warned the United States

of their threats.”

“The US trained the guerrilla groups that opposed the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan...but in the end, those groups turned against them. After all that, how could they acknowledge their threat, especially when it’s reported from Russia, their enemy?”

“That is the norm with international politics.”

“Let me ask you something: what reason do you have for protecting the girl? Can’t you just use Islamic terrorism as an excuse and make it look unrelated?”

“As someone high up in line to succeed as head of the Romanov family, many desire her return to the homeland and accept her ascension, and her supporters simply have too much power. If she were to die, we don’t know how the oligarchs who strongly oppose the president or the conservatives might act. Also...”

“Also?”

“Also...she is in control of many Russian debts that materialized after the financial crisis. The assurance that she and her fund purchased these debts is supporting our current national loans. I hope you can leave some signs behind that we were the ones who prevented her assassination.”

“So that’s another thing you want to ask of me?”

“Yes, it is. Please accept my request to eliminate the sniper who is after the girl. The reward is 2 million dollars. I’ll have it deposited into a Swiss bank account.”

“Fine...I’ll do my best.”

“They’re here, Director.”

“Sorry, but could you toss this magazine out for me?”

Maefuji Shouichi, the man being addressed as “Director,” made that request before exiting the patrol car. A director was a police official who led investigations, and the job generally resulted in a promotion to superintendent.

“This way, Director Maefuji.”

He had come to a certain place in Shinjuku. There, in an alleyway in the shadow of a skyscraper towering above, lay a dead body. Director Maefuji bowed to the local officer and headed to the crime scene.

“So the victim is a foreigner?”

“Looks like a paparazzo. He had a press pass and everything. His name was Marcus Gordon, a 43-year-old British man.”

In response to Director Maefuji’s question, Inspector Natsume Kentarou read the information off his notepad. The inspector was Director Maefuji’s subordinate and a career bureaucrat of a policeman.

“He must have been photographing something if he was a paparazzo. I wonder what his target was?”

The director’s eyes turned toward the camera on the ground. It was broken and didn’t contain any film, either.

“They’re having Miss Keikain Runa’s birthday party at the Shinjuku Keika Hotel, aren’t they? I heard that the prime minister was there as well. I’d guess that was what he was after.”

When the two glanced over toward the entrance, they saw that reporters were already aiming their cameras at the scene. Their unusually fast arrival pointed to the possibility that someone had leaked information about the crime.

“But that wouldn’t make sense. You can’t see the Shinjuku Keika Hotel from here.”

“I’m having my subordinates search for a place where you can see the hotel. I believe that will be the true scene of the crime.”

“Very good. Sounds like you’ve studied up, Natsume.”

“It’s the result of working with someone as constantly reckless as you, Senpai.”

The two men looked back at the corpse. They would have to wait for the autopsy report to come in, but the manner of death didn’t suggest suicide.

“His skin color’s not what you’d expect for a British guy.”

“The British embassy gave us some info. Apparently, the victim was born in Pakistan, immigrated to the United Kingdom, and obtained citizenship when he was adopted. His cause of death appears to be fractured bones in the neck. We’ll have to wait for the results, but that’s my assessment of the crime scene.”

Director Maefuji thought back to the manga he’d been reading in the car. It seemed like fiction, but the corporate party being held at the same time as the crime didn’t seem like coincidence. This would probably require more police work.

“This is the worst. I’ve already been told that I can’t have anything to do with the Keikain Dukedom.”

“But we can’t just ignore this. The Cabinet Information Research Office has already asked for a report on the case.”

Intelligence agencies had their eyes on the death of one single paparazzo. Just what had this man been here to photograph?

“Excuse me! Director Maefuji! Could you come over here for a minute?”

The local policeman guarding the entrance called out to the other two men, who were still talking in front of the body. They made their way over and saw a foreign woman who looked like she could work in foreign investments in Marunouchi smiling back at them.

“I am a private employee of Miss Keikain Runa. My name is Angela Sullivan. Would you be willing to explain this situation to me as a representative of the Keikain Dukedom?”

“I am Maefuji of the Metropolitan Police’s Public Safety Bureau. Your Japanese is quite fluent.”

“I previously worked at the American-Japanese embassy, so Japan is like a second home to me now.”

They couldn’t have a proper conversation in front of all the media, so they finished introducing themselves at the alleyway crime scene before getting down to business. Though they were both smiling on the outside, the look in

their eyes told a different story. They made it through their disingenuous greetings and jumped into the main topic.

“The Keikain family is concerned that this incident is being treated as a crime.”

“A paparazzo was killed while going after a young lady. It’s like something out of a gossip show.”

Truth didn’t matter here. The rules of this world were to follow the most convenient interpretations of the facts.

“Please promise me something. You didn’t kill him, did you?”

“Of course not. Why would I ever risk murdering one mere paparazzo in a place like this?”

Although the promise had been fulfilled, the two continued to glare at each other. Inspector Natsume stepped in to interject.

“Senpai, I was wondering if this man was even a paparazzo at all.”

“What else would he be?” Angela responded before Director Maefuji could.

Inspector Natsume looked back at the body to elaborate. “He doesn’t have what any paparazzo should.”

“Like what?”

Inspector Natsume immediately responded to the director’s question. “Night vision equipment. If he knew what time the party was, wouldn’t he have it with him? But there’s none here.”

This came as a shock to both Director Maefuji and Angela.

“You said you can’t see Shinjuku Keika Hotel from here, right? Maybe the equipment was dropped at the real crime scene.”

“That’s impossible. Kitakaba Security officers were stationed at all the sniping vantage points around the hotel and we’re willing to share images from all of them, including from security cameras outside of those spots.”

Angela’s request for cooperation was, in another way, an offer of a backroom deal regarding a murder case. Considering the possibility that the killer was

Angela or someone else who worked for the Keikain family, Director Maefuji was desperate to obtain any information from her that he could get. He looked at his watch and saw that it was already past midnight.

“Natsume, contact headquarters and tell them this is a request in the interest of public safety. The time of death for the murdered foreigner is estimated to be around midnight. We need to say we’re investigating whether the motive for his murder was someone trying to rob foreign tourists. Bringing up my name or the Keikains will make them angry, so don’t say anything more than that.”

“Senpai?!”

“I appreciate your cooperation, Director Maefuji.”

The media would announce that the murder occurred the day after the party. The most convenient facts, as opposed to the truth, were corrupting his decision. Instead of a paparazzo dying in pursuit of the Keikain family, the case would be presented as the death of a foreigner who was visiting Shinjuku.

“Let me ask you for something too. I know your people didn’t kill this man, since you’re willing to say as much as you did, but it seems like you have suspicions of the true killer’s identity.”

“...I have to ask that you never tell my lady about this. Miss Runa was once nearly kidnapped by a certain Russian intelligence agency, and they may be behind this incident too. Only this time, their goal would be to save her.”

“Ah, so that’s what it is? Understood. It would definitely seem fishy to talk to her about it.”

Angela gave him some advice derived from her former profession. One could call it a token of gratitude for the deal they struck.

Both Angela and Director Maefuji understood just how vital these connections were in the world they lived in.

“Allow me to think out loud for a bit, strictly to myself. The victim’s religious background should be investigated. There’s a chance he’s tied to extremist groups. The United Kingdom is home to many Russian immigrants, and intelligence agencies are taking root.”

In other words, she was hinting that the incident was caused by Karafuto's close connection to the immigrant situation, despite a different level of influence.

Director Maefuji believed that Angela would keep this case a secret from her mistress and deal with the situation on her own. He decided to ask her a question.

"Tell me something. Who exactly are you loyal to?"

"That much is obvious. I'm loyal to Miss Runa, for as long as our contract lasts."

After Angela left, Director Maefuji spoke to the inspector again.

"Natsume, why don't you join the fifth bodyguard unit?"

"You mean with the young lady? I wouldn't mind, but why are you asking me?"

"I told you—the Keikain Dukedom hates me."

In the end, this case was another that would remain unsolved. Only later did they find explosive powder hidden in the soles of the victim's shoes, and thus he was declared a terrorist suicide bomber. Afterward, in the fall of that year, it was discovered that the victim had been in contact with radical Islamists.

Glossary and Notes

Chechen War: The nightmare of the Soviet Union and Russia after their Afghanistan intervention. When extremist Islamic fighters returned to Chechnya from Afghanistan, they joined the fighting as part of a holy war, giving glimpses of the terrorist networks that would form in the future.

British immigration: A mosaic from the Commonwealth of Nations. Many people fled Pakistan as near-refugees due to the political situation there, leading plenty of impoverished people in the UK to encounter Islamic

extremism.

The manga: *Golgo 13*. Saito Takao, Shogakukan.

Chapter 4:

The Last Days of the Den-en-chofu Manor

ONCE WE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLERS entered the upper grades, we could start participating in club activities. This was a highlight of every student's school life, but at the same time, it was a major time commitment. We naturally discussed this topic even before we reached fifth grade, which would be our first chance to participate.

"Runa, are you going to join a club?"

We were sitting in the cafeteria during our lunch break, eating today's lunch special of Hamburg steak. I answered Eiichi-kun's sudden question without a second thought.

"I am. I think I'll go for the kendo club."

"Huh?"

"Really? *You*, Keikain-san?"

"That's surprising."

Everyone replied in unison. *What exactly do you boys think of me?* Eiichi-kun was joining the track and field club, Yuujirou-kun had chosen the kendo club, and Mitsuya-kun would be a member of the going-home club. Since home and family duties were usually given priority, the elementary school club activities were very pure in execution and not compulsory.

"I thought for sure you'd take up track and field."

"They did invite me. I'll be sure to join them as backup if they ever need help."

Well, it would have been stranger *not* to receive that invitation after my performance at the sports festival. But I felt that joining the track and field club would make me the center of attention, which sounded like a bit of a pain. So I decided to join the less-popular kendo club, which allowed ghost members too.

“So you’re joining the kendo club? Think you can really do it?”

“Well, I’ve had someone at home teach me some things already,” I replied confidently to Mitsuya-kun.

I was still a wicked villainess with cheat-like specs, so I had to be accomplished in both the literary and physical arts. I took a bite of my Hamburg steak, wiped the ketchup from my mouth, and continued.

“I was almost kidnapped once. I feel like I should learn enough to be able to defend myself.”

That was why I had them train with me at first, but I found Northern Japanese kendo, with its Russian military influences, rather fascinating.

“By the way, it was my maid Kitagumo-san who taught me kendo, and it’s quite an interesting art. Anyhow, at first I was completely against learning it.”

“Huh?”

It was Yuujirou-kun who cried out. He was clearly hooked by this topic since he practiced kendo at home too.

“After all, it used to be a Russian martial art. How can a country whose national policy is to chase and chase until the enemy is tired and cut them down call that ‘the art of the sword’?”

We were taught that martial arts and sports, including kendo, relied on one’s heart, technique, and strength. But that was only during competitions.

While I was still dressed in my kendo uniform, Kitagumo-san had warned me that being a young lady meant things would always be different.

“Please imagine your hypothetical circumstances as you perform this move, my lady. You would be actively under attack without any attendants around. It’s such a disadvantageous situation that heart, technique, and strength don’t matter at all.”

I agreed with what she said. As she continued to explain, I got the sense that she had moved from describing kendo moves to general self-defense, but I didn’t fully realize the truth at the time.

“You have one weapon you can use, my lady. It is your voice. You’ve even

received requests from Europe for singing performances, and since you're capable of making your voice so loud, you should scream 'Help me!' at the top of your lungs. But even then, all the enemy would have to do is silence you."

I understood and decided to ask her a question.

"When I was nearly kidnapped, they distracted my guard with a stun grenade and knocked me out with a stun gun."

"That was because you only had a single guard with you. You now have enough bodyguards for them to observe each other and prevent betrayals. Haven't you noticed how many maids come with you whenever you leave home?"

I see. I had my drivers, my maids, my bodyguards, and Tachibana and Angela at my side. I understood what she meant.

"Here is what one must master to be able to fight in situations like this," she continued. "Keep breathing, maintain a state of relaxation, always stand up nice and straight, and move constantly. Once you're able to do these things, you may pick up a bamboo sword."

It made sense. Kitagumo-san, as a former soldier, was very rational. She smiled at me.

"Also, physical strength is required in arts such as these, but you build that strength by starting from the bottom half up. Let's start running. Naturally, it's perfectly possible to build muscle while maintaining a beautiful and feminine appearance."

"Excuse me?"

A few minutes later, I had changed from my kendo uniform into jogging clothes and was running through Den-en-chofu between Kitagumo-san and two other maids... *Wait, then what was the point of putting on the kendo uniform in the first place?*

"You know, Runa, I kind of think..."

Eiichi-kun seemed to be uncomfortable saying it, so unusually enough, Yuujirou-kun was the one to spit it out...and he did it with a straight face.

“I don’t think it’s kendo you’ve been doing, Keikain-san.”

Mitsuya-kun came in to deliver the final blow. Apparently, he’d been looking it up online with his PHS.

“I think it’s some kind of Russian military martial art like Systema.”

I knew it.

“Kyaaaah! Keikain-samaaaaa!”

“Keikain-senpai is so cool!”

“Look! She landed another hit!”

Who says you can’t apply Systema to kendo?

After saying that cool line in my head, I bowed and removed my mask.

There was no such thing as a Systema club at my school, so I ended up becoming a once-a-week ghost member of the kendo club. But since my unfair body had absorbed both arts perfectly, I ended up winning the city’s kendo tournament.

It goes without saying that next year’s kendo club saw a huge increase in new members.

“That’s it. Keep the barrel straight without relaxing your posture...”

Following Angela’s instructions, I pulled the trigger on the Beretta 92. The shot came out quieter than I expected.

“Would you like to go on a vacation, my lady?”

It was after my Systema practice when Angela suddenly asked me that question, apparently afraid that my dedication to Eastern martial arts would divert my loyalty to that part of the world. I knew that Angela wasn’t the type of person to say something so ridiculous at a time like this.

“A vacation? Where to?”

“To Guam. We can make it a day trip if you like. It would be a nice change of

pace to swim in a southern ocean.”

Angela’s fishy smile made her look like a saleswoman on a late-night TV show. I knew it was best to play along.

“Okay then, Angela. And what’s the main dish to enjoy on this trip?”

Angela grinned and answered my question plainly. Her revelation of the activity made me wonder whether she forgot from time to time that I was still in elementary school.

“Right. We’ll go on a shooting tour at American military bases!”

“To be perfectly obvious, there’s nothing you can’t do, my lady.”

That was what Angela said to me inside our private jet. Well, I certainly couldn’t tell her that my villainess cheats were the cause of that, so I simply remained silent and waited for her to continue.

“Becoming an adult is the same as abandoning opportunities. You can do anything, my lady, which means you could become a monster. One reason the United States allows important people from many countries to visit for cultural exchange is to prevent the rise of dictators.”

“And you think that’s what I’m going to become at this rate?”

“You’ve already amassed a great fortune and have brought multiple Japanese corporate groups under your control. I know just how scholarly you are too. You’re now studying military hand-to-hand combat. Once you can do everything on your own, why even listen to the opinions of others?”

I thought for a moment.

It seemed that she saw me as a very dangerous person. At this point, I agreed with that assessment, so I decided to ask her the most important question.

“How does that relate to this gun-shooting adventure of yours?”

Even with the knowledge from both my past and current life, I couldn’t understand it. I cocked my head all the way to one side.

Angela continued to explain upon seeing my reaction.

“You’re studying military combat to protect yourself, correct, my lady? If that’s the case, then learning how to use a gun would be much more effective.”

“But I don’t think people under the protection of others should ever have to fire a gun.”

“I agree. That’s why I said that you can’t do everything. At this rate, I’m worried that you’ll want to single-handedly take on assailants armed with firearms. That sort of thing only works in movies!”

I finally understood. Since I’d been half-heartedly learning military combat, Angela thought I wouldn’t properly assess the threat if I were faced with a gun. In her mind, only firing a weapon in real life would hammer the point home.

“Pardon me. We’ll be arriving at Andersen Air Force Base in Guam shortly, so please fasten your seatbelts,” my maid Eva, who had of course come with us, announced, and I glared at Angela. A normal private jet would never land directly at an American air force base. There could only be one reason for this.

“Angela, at what level, exactly, am I being targeted?”

For some reason, Andersen Air Force Base was on high alert. Soldiers with guns drawn stood on guard around the parked aircraft, staring straight at our plane.

Angela wore a look of amusement on her face as she answered me.

“A private jet is doing something as absurd as landing at an American air force base. Please read between the lines.”

The United States was a society of guns. The result was a large number of gun crimes, spawning debates about gun control that would spark and then die down again. This cycle had repeated often lately. When I took the opportunity to ask Angela and Eva about it, the story they told was an amusing one.

“The country is too large. When something happens, it takes the police two whole hours to show up.”

“And if it’s not a criminal, it’s a bear or a crocodile, which you can’t exactly talk down.”

Huh? This didn't sound like the America I knew. Angela smiled awkwardly and explained what was bothering me.

"My lady, you're familiar with coastal areas of America like New York and California. Those urban places are strongholds for the Democratic Party, and that's the image of America that the media projects around the world. It's not unlike Tokyo in Japan."

I see. It's surprisingly easy to forget that America has rural areas too. I continued with the topic.

"Why don't gun control measures make any progress there?"

"Because the police aren't trustworthy."

"It's tied to the climate of racism in America, so we can't come to a solution."

Angela and Eva's responses left me speechless. Black Americans and immigrants were moving to the cities, but most of the police in charge of public safety were white. That was why criminal investigations descended into racism, and people felt that the only means of safety was to protect themselves.

It was only natural that, since the population was whiter the further you went into rural areas, discrimination became more common. The notorious KKK was one example of this. The country was reunified after the Civil War, but the problem of north versus south was still a deep-rooted one in America.

"Some people also believe that all women should carry guns."

"Huh?"

I was dumbfounded to learn that guns somehow related to gender discrimination too, not just racism. Angela and Eva laughed at me. In a way, they were here now because they had fought against that same discrimination. I wondered just how much hardship they'd experienced in their lives.

"Guns are anti-men weapons that have been given to women."

"We generally can't defeat men in battles of stature or strength, so for women, guns can balance the scales or be used to destroy men."

This was anything but a fun topic, but it sounded like some women who were victims of violence made the choice to carry guns.

It was how they reacted to learning just how powerless both they and society were.

“I was so surprised when you told me to fire a gun, Angela. I believe the people opposed to gun control are lobbying and donating to the Republican Party, correct?”

“I actually support gun control myself. But still, I don’t reject guns as a self-defense option just because of that.”

I was kind of amazed by Angela’s way of compartmentalizing it like that.

When I decided to ask the same thing of Eva, this was how she answered:

“Well, I’m Texan.”

“You look tan, Runa. Did you go somewhere?”

The next day at school, Eiichi-kun immediately pointed out this change in me. I smiled and tried to make it sound better than it was.

All I’d done was shoot guns and then take a swim in the ocean, since I didn’t want to waste my remaining time there.

“I just went south for a little vacation!”

“Pardon me. I am Keikain Runa, and I’ll be participating in today’s marathon special. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

I entered the dressing room, bowed, and greeted the occupant. There were many rooms prepared for all the entertainers who were taking part in the special show, but I went around to greet each one individually. It was a long endeavor.

“Nice to meet ya.”

“You’ve got this.”

“What agency is that kid with?”

I’d started with the green room, and the stars there seemed to think I was a

child actress. But the kind of actors who got their own rooms knew who I was and greeted me as such.

“A sponsor like you didn’t have to come here. I would have come to you to say hello. Thank you very much.”

But they were the people who would never come to greet me. This special program was aired on Akasaka’s channel in spring and fall, and since the Teisei Department Store was a sponsor, this put the Keika Group’s name in the mix too.

“There’re so many people here! I wouldn’t have come if I knew I’d have to meet so many talented people.”

Despite my complaints, these sorts of greetings were very important. The eyes of the mass media were getting more intense too, and it sounded like a pain to try to oppose them.

The reason I still decided to participate in Akasaka’s Fifth District Marathon was that I’d received an offer directly from the host.

I pretended to let the host, who was at the peak of his popularity, talk me into appearing, but it wasn’t as if I didn’t have the ulterior motive of sneakily building connections.

“But you’re the one who wanted to do this, my lady. Waiting in the dressing room is boring. Let’s go say hello to everyone.”

Anisha, dressed in her maid uniform, sounded bored as she made her suggestion. Angela was still speaking with a higher-up at the TV station.

They were, of course, discussing defamatory coverage of me.

“Couldn’t you make the station executives pull the plug by threatening to take away sponsorships?”

“That won’t work, Anisha. The people at the top in this country don’t have any influence. It’s the ones on the ground who hold the real power.”

The Japanese military organization during the Pacific War had just recently proved this point, and now the mass media industry was dealing with the same issue.

Producers, newscasters, hosts, and commentators had power in the form of real-time decisions. One host even boasted of personally causing the downfall of three different cabinets.

These were the people who were after me. It was technically possible to upset the sponsors and have the show canceled, but overdoing it would solidify my status as a villain. I needed to strike the right balance.

“How difficult this must be for you. In my hometown, orders from leaders have always resulted in action.”

“But this is freedom. It’s democracy. You can say what you like, but so can other people. Okay, let’s keep going.”

“Sure!”

I started to get overwhelmed by the auras of the major stars I was meeting.

Interestingly enough, as people whose job was mimicking others, learning how to play the role of someone else made the most successful actors even less tactful than politicians and bureaucrats.

“Oh my, look at this! Thank you for stopping by.”

They also had armies of disciples following them around. The pressure I felt upon entering the room took me aback. I wouldn’t be able to achieve such intensity even if I were an adult. I didn’t carry that kind of weight. At the end of the day, that was why people criticized and underestimated me.

Thus, I needed to tell everyone that I could get results by using all my money to go tit-for-tat with the station.

“Thank you for coming. Please make yourself at home.”

When I went to greet the occupant of that dressing room, they happened to be chatting with the show’s host about the marathon I was going to participate in. I greeted them, and the host asked me this question: “I know you’ve been saying hello to everyone. Why did you start with the green room?”

“Yes, well, the people at the top already know who I am, so I thought I should start by greeting the people who don’t know me.”

I had to act friendly and play the part of the adorable young lady.

“Even if they don’t recognize me or scold me, I can just act like an ignorant child. I’ll be taking full advantage of that perk.”

“Ha! It’s scary how well you understand your own strengths.”

The main occupant of the room laughed. He was in charge of coming up with the rules and special advantages for most marathon competitions, so his mood influenced how the marathon would function. This could work either to my benefit or to my disadvantage.

“Say, what’s your favorite TV show?”

I cocked my head at the man. His question sounded assertive.

At the time, I didn’t understand the weight and finality of those words.

“Either the ones where amateurs try different arts or the ones where professionals show their private lives. In other words, I think documentaries are the most interesting shows on TV.”

“Time to get started, everyone! It’s the Akasaka Gochoume Mini-Marathon! We’ve got some very special guests with us today! Meet the star of the Teisei Department Stores’ ad campaign, Keikain Runa-san!”

I entered the studio to a round of applause. Naturally, my running clothes and shoes were all specially made by a sporting goods store.

Ah, there’s that famous photographer. Please don’t shoot me from the answer seat.

“We have some special rules for Runa-san today. She will be allowed a head start over everyone else. The Akasaka Gochoume Mini-Marathon consists of three laps, but she will only have to complete two. Anyone who manages to surpass her will be awarded one hundred thousand yen thanks to our sponsor, Teisei Department Stores.”

The female host’s explanation fired up the other participants. There were about fifty people, and all of them were confident in their physical stamina.

I was only participating in the marathon, not the quiz, but between my physical cheats and the special rules, there was no one here who could beat

me.

“My lady, would you please tell the audience what you’re hoping to get out of today?”

“Victory.”

That was all I said. I spoke calmly and coolly, straight into the camera. All that remained was to show Japan what I was capable of. As soon as the starter’s pistol rang out in the studio, I took off like the wind.

“Fast! She’s so fast! This is no ordinary girl!”

I ran and ran and ran despite the adults and track stars in pursuit. And as I ran, the ratings increased. Up and up they climbed. I easily made it up the heart-destroying Akasaka hill, broke through the golden tape in front of me, and sent a shockwave through the studio while the program reached its highest simultaneous viewership in history.

“No one was able to surpass the young lady in the end, but our sponsor, Teisei Department Stores, has just told us that they’ll still be awarding each participant one hundred thousand yen! Congratulations, everyone!”

I was glad that I’d asked Anisha to make this arrangement with the host just to be safe. I was sure the other participants were upset that they lost, but as celebrities, they would focus on the prize money in the end.

It would also affect how both the higher-ups and the people here on the scene covered me.

“Please let us interview you on your victory, my lady. How did you feel about this marathon?”

“It was nothing!”

Those words I intentionally chose to make me sound more like a villainess ended up winning the award for the most-quoted phrase of the year. At the time, I had no idea this moment would come back at the end of the year to mortify me.

One of Angela Sullivan’s hobbies was watching Japanese movies. However,

she worked an irregular schedule that made putting aside two hours or so to visit a movie theater almost impossible, so she gifted me a “terrific new product in the world of science and technology”: a VCR.

“Oh, are you going to watch a movie, Angela?” I asked, fear creeping into my voice. I had just recently been traumatized by a Japanese horror movie we watched together, and my fight-or-flight reflexes were starting to kick in.

“Don’t worry, my lady. It’s not a horror movie.”

She showed me the tape’s box. It was a popular movie that had played on TV many times.

“I’ve seen this on TV more than once, but surprisingly, I don’t seem to remember much about it.”

“With so many movies out there, the stories follow similar patterns. It’s the differences that make them fun. This movie involves guests, a heroine, and a travel destination, then it ends in the usual way. To Japanese people, it’s a reminder of what daily life is like.”

Angela, the American, gave a detailed explanation. I, Keikain Runa, one-fourth Japanese, simply nodded along.

“I didn’t know you loved this movie so much, Angela.”

“I don’t. It’s just that Americans can’t resist a ‘homeland’ story.”

I sucked grape juice through a straw while Angela picked up slices of bacon pizza and gobbled them down. The two of us chatted as we watched the movie. I couldn’t take my eyes off the TV. Somewhere along the way, the topic shifted to the origin story of the United States.

“The people who founded America were chased out of their homeland. That was why they had to make the New World their home.”

“They were called the Pilgrims, right?”

“Right. They were our great ancestors.”

To put it more simply, their founding story was the act of making the United States... *Hmm?*

“Ancestors?”

“Yes. One of my ancestors was on the *Mayflower*.”

Bubbles formed in my glass of grape juice as if they were sneering at my shock.

I set the glass down, pressed my fingers to my brow, and remembered Angela’s past.

“You’re from the east coast, right?”

“That’s right. My family were farmers for generations and went to many ‘parties’.”

“And how did such a talented woman end up here, watching movies about Japan?”

The word “farmers” tipped me off. Her family was descended from the Pilgrims and owned farmland on the east coast.

The US was the land of freedom, but that only meant that education fees were sky-high. Being a CIA data analyst indicated that she had an excellent education and connections. *So that’s why she’s a Democrat? I see. Angela is part of the American elite.*

“One reason was that I got swept up in the movement for women’s rights. I worked on Wall Street in the 1980s when America was coming up in the world. Then I met my husband and had my daughter.”

“Angela, you were married?!”

I couldn’t help shouting at her. She’d kept this private life to herself all this time, only to suddenly bring it up out of nowhere. I didn’t know how to react. Angela smiled awkwardly and followed up with something even more shocking.

“Well, it was because I got pregnant before we were married. Then one day, he just never came home.”

I had no words.

Since there was nothing I could say without potentially setting her off, Angela casually began to explain her past.

Her face was that of a woman who had long since chosen her path.

“I probably love this movie because the main character comes home in the end. No matter where he wanders off to, he always returns home to see his friends and family. In my case, he never came back.”

She fell silent, so I began to make my own deductions. The possibility I landed on slipped naturally from my lips.

It was an explanation for why Angela joined the CIA and came to live in this country.

“Did your husband disappear here in Japan?”

“You’re as clever as ever, my lady. However, I suggest keeping that brain in check, since detectives who are too clever sometimes end up getting killed by criminals.”

I silently nodded as Angela squinted at me, her expression giving off a cold chill.

It was safer to stay quiet than to risk doing something unwise.

“Back then, Japan was our ally and was in the middle of the bubble. Behind the scenes, they were in harsh conflict with the socialists in Karafuto. My husband was undercover as a businessman on Wall Street when we started dating. But then he disappeared, and when I tried to find him, I finally learned his true identity through a friend. I joined the CIA to discover the truth, came to this country, and now I’m watching a movie here with you.”

The film had already come to an end. Angela took the tape out of the VCR and smiled.

“All right, that’s enough movies for now.”

When I returned to my room, I went through my history books. There was one big event in the late ’80s that I couldn’t rule out.

The fall of the Berlin Wall—1989.

The downfall of the Eastern Bloc sent many people into madness. Somewhere amid that dark history, Angela’s husband disappeared.

It was also when my father, Keikain Otsumaro, betrayed his country. Connections between people weren't strictly things of the here and now. They existed in the past, and sometimes stretched backward from the present. I thought about this as I closed the history book.

Even private schools mingled at times with other institutions. One example of this was the district-wide competitions that all the sports clubs participated in. The serious players never wanted to lose a single match, much less a tournament, which produced a delicate set of circumstances. The common strategy to deal with this was to send in backup players who had good PE grades to replace the younger players. This had become the norm.

The middle grades had scholarship students participate, but the younger grades could only get players from the other sports clubs. That was how this situation came about.

In other words, it was a given that those three boys would be asked to join.

They were all supposed to play in the soccer match, but...

"Why, exactly, are you forcing me to play?"

Dressed in my gym clothes, I glared at the three of them, but they didn't seem to care. It was truly irritating.

"What else can we do, Runa? You're better at sports than the average boy."

"Our starter and our backup both got the flu, and now we're really hurting. We don't want to be down a player. Sorry, Keikain, but we need your help."

"The other team agreed to make it a friendly match where we won't keep permanent records. I don't care if we lose, I just want to play a fair game. It sounds like the other team is completely made up of their soccer club members."

All the members of the Quartet, including myself, hated to lose. We had similar levels of physical strength because we were all in elementary school, although I kept it a secret that my own source of strength was my villainess cheats.

“And what position will you make me play?”

Eiichi-kun responded instantly to my bewildered question.

“Goalie.”

As the Japanese people came to accept the World Cup, soccer was gradually becoming more recognized and even transformed in the process, oddly enough.

Elementary schoolers who knew nothing about the sport usually all swarmed the ball and made a big commotion, but once someone who *did* understand it joined in, the concepts of positions and zone awareness began to take hold.

“I see. Goalie, huh?”

Eiichi-kun was at the front as a forward, but the ball didn’t come to him often.

Yuujirou-kun was a midfielder and the person calling the shots, but it wasn’t enough to surpass the organization of our opponents.

“Here it comes, Keikain! Block the left side!”

“Raaaah!”

I punched away the ball and blocked yet another shot. I listened to the instructions while Mitsuya-kun, a defender, continued to swipe away any balls coming my way. I made up my mind at the start not to try catching any balls unless I was sure I could do it.

“Throw the ball out! Mess up their rhythm!”

“Push forward! They’re tired from being on the offensive all this time!”

This was a half match lasting twenty minutes, but our opponents’ attempts to split us up backfired due to our cheat-like specs.

Our other players couldn’t handle the opponents’ constant passes. Eiichi-kun was turning into a toy soldier, and Yuujirou-kun had to play defense, so he came all the way back to my line.

Mitsuya-kun’s protection kept me safe on his side, but all the other team had to do was go around him until they had a straight shot toward me.

I couldn’t block every shot in the end. The ball went flying just past my hand.

It hit the net, and as I remained on my knees with sweat dripping down my cheeks, I watched from the corner of my eye as their forward struck a victory pose. The referee blew the whistle to signal the first point.

We managed to keep them to this one goal in the first half, but I foresaw a future where they only got more aggressive in the second half.

“It’s not going to work at this rate.”

I handed Eiichi-kun a sports drink and he agreed with me between sips. I handed more bottles to Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun.

“We’re laid out all wrong. I’m out of place, so I’ll go to midfield and take care of it with Yuujirou.” Eiichi-kun responded while wiping his sweat away with a towel.

“But in that case, we’ll be attacking from further back, so the other team will just push even further forward. I know it’s not working, but I think we should still try to make some kind of counterattack.” Yuujirou-kun spoke back with a throat lozenge in his mouth. His voice was hoarse from constantly shouting out defensive instructions.

“Izumikawa’s right. We should leave some room for counterattacks. But we also shouldn’t leave Teia out there to just play around, so let’s move him to midfielder. And Keikain, if you’re just kicking, how far can you move the ball?”

As love interest characters in the game, these three boys had even more cheats than I did. I was so amazed that they could come up with countermeasures against the opponents on the spot like this. Not that I had any obligation to tell them that.

“I can get it to midfield. Why?”

“Got it. Keikain, from here on, you’ve gotta kick all the balls from the net to midfield. We’ve got Teia and Izumikawa, so one of them will receive it. That’s how we’ll set up our counterattacks.”

“Understood.”

The second half began.

The other team, which had overlooked our strengths, tried to charge us head-

on again, but this only ruined their start. Eiichi-kun had taken on the role of midfielder now, allowing Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun to work together as a pair. It made breaking through the zone between them much more difficult.

Of course, the other team could still evade them by going around to the sides, but that meant restricting their own path to me. They were missing the net much more often now.

“Here I go!”

My kick soared high in the air and landed next to Eiichi-kun in halfway up the field.

Since he’d been nothing more than a toy soldier in the first half, he still had plenty of strength remaining in his body.

“GOOOO!”

Eiichi-kun’s first shot was centered right at the goal, so their goalkeeper easily smacked it away. But this one move changed the other team’s whole perception of the game. They started avoiding pointless attacks and focused on making us run, trying to drain our energy and nudge out a close win. In other words, they finally saw us as a real threat.

At times like these, everything came down to group synthesis, not individual talents. Neither Eiichi-kun nor Yuujirou-kun nor Mitsuya-kun had infinite stamina, and their fatigue drove them to make mental mistakes, which allowed the other team to attack mercilessly and reduce our energy even further. I was forced stand on the front line of our exhausted team.

“Oh no!”

The opposing forward knew just how many balls I’d hit away. In other words, he could tell I had good visual tracking and energy, but I was still a girl who’d been called to play unexpectedly and I probably had no one-on-one experience.

Our defense crumbled, and I found myself face-to-face with the forward. It was nearly a checkmate. I stuck my leg out toward him, but he easily crossed it to push the ball into the goal. That was the finishing blow. We lost the game 0-2.

“Nice save.”

“Thanks. But we still couldn’t stop you.”

During the post-game handshakes, the same forward grinned at me as he took my hand.

I was trying my best to smile back, but he probably saw that I was a bit bitter too.

“I’m glad you couldn’t stop us through the *whole* game, at least. I’ve actually been invited to the junior leagues. What do you say? Want an autograph from a future World Cup player?”

“I’ll have to pass. But when that day comes, I’ll gladly buy you a beer.”

I got kind of a good impression of the boy for seeing me as nothing more than a soccer player in this situation.

Since we’d played soccer together, we were now friends. Elementary school students often thought in that simple way.

“I like the sound of that. I’ll look forward to it.”

Once I separated from the boy who took my words as a joke, I returned to the others.

The other three boys were the only ones whose faces mirrored my own look of regret at the loss.

“Damn it, I just feel like I could have done better.”

“Me too. We lost to their teamwork and tactics. If we ever want to beat them, we’ll have to practice those same things on our end.”

“I see. So that’s why we could play in a tournament like this? Getting scholarship students from the middle grades would make us equal to the other team. Us losing like this is a way for soccer club members to teach us what the sport is really like.”

I clapped my hands together. Soccer started out training the youngest students and a class structure formed from within. Maybe I could build a team whose talent would one day go on to win the World Cup.

I'd never been able to witness such a thing in my past life, though.

"Then why don't we use this frustration to help the sport of soccer itself?"

I decided to call Tachibana and make a donation to a soccer organization. *Do your best, strikers of the future!*

My sneakers were brand new. So was my backpack. I also had rainwear just in case, plus a water bottle, compass, map, tarp, and towel. I packed two changes of clothes and put some medicine, snacks, and emergency rations in a plastic bag.

"All right, let me carry that backpack for you."

"Nooooo! I wanna carry it!"

"What's with Runa?"

"Apparently, Keikain was excited about the mountain climbing trip and got all geared up, but her maids are going to carry her stuff most of the way, so it didn't matter in the end."

"I see. That sounds like Keikain-san, all right."

Today, we were going on a hiking trip for school. We had gathered at Takaosanguchi Station.

The school event was a hike up Mount Takao. It was six in the morning, which meant we had to wake up at four to get to the station on time. By the way, something about this trip was slightly different from other school events...

"Gather up, platoon! Depart with your squadron! We're here at headquarters and a base is set up at the top of the mountain, so be sure to check your channels. Count off: three, two, one, zero!"

"First Squadron goes first on Trail One. Second Squadron takes Trail Four by cable car. Third Squadron will also take the cable car down Trail Three. Fourth Squadron takes Trail Six. Fifth Squadron, you'll take the Mount Inari route. Sixth Squadron will be on standby as backup. Seventh Squadron will be at the mountain peak, so contact them if there's any trouble. Don't forget to keep watch over the sides of the road!"

“Hey, Anisha-san, that’s our security company, right?”

“That’s correct, my lady. Don’t tell me you forgot?”

Anisha, the maid accompanying me today, responded calmly. She was holding my bag up high enough that I couldn’t reach it.

Anisha had the most maid-like mannerisms of all my staff. The reason for that was the training she undertook as a former KGB honey trap agent.

While being versed in the means of seduction was normal for intelligence agents, she probably never imagined she would use those skills to become a real maid. I pretended not to know who her former pals were. Naturally, she did not get along with my personal secretaries like Angela and Eva.

I put my hands on my hips, puffed out my cheeks, and pointed at the group.

“Why are they here?”

“They say it’s training.”

Huh, I see. Wait, no! These are the guys from Hokkaido! They don’t have weapons, but their camo uniforms are scary! The plainclothes detective in the police car who’s supposed to watch out for this sort of thing is rubbing his eyes sleepily and staring at us!

“He introduced himself to me already, right? He’s Inspector Natsume.”

“You know Maefuji-san, don’t you, my lady? He’s that man’s kouhai.”

Right, right. His smile tells me his senpai pawned the worst duty off on him... No, I’m getting off topic.

“We’re clearly way overprotected!”

“If anything, this isn’t enough. I actually wanted to close this entire place off to the public.”

Anisha flatly snapped back at my angry remark. In truth, I had trouble resisting pressure. Nervously, I decided to stop pushing back.

“I will not interfere with my lady’s choices,” said Anisha, “but I merely wish you would come to understand your position. I would be overjoyed if you did. As a young lady of the Keikain Dukedom...”

Ah, this is going to go on for a while. I looked around in a panic for backup, but everyone around me was gone, and I felt just how fleeting friendship could be.

Mount Takao was 599 meters above sea level. We were going to climb the first trail, a four-kilometer trip which was supposed to last two hours. Since the road was mostly paved, it was often used for events like this one. The trick to climbing mountains was to maintain a steady pace. Falling into disarray along the way didn't help anything, but we were elementary schoolers, after all. Everyone's pace had reduced to a total stagger.

"We're not going as fast as I thought we would..."

I wiped my sweat away, maintaining my position at the very back of the line. We had been walking for more than thirty minutes now. A group hike like this depended on the speed of the people at the tail end. I was bringing up the rear to fulfill my role as class representative and help those in the back.

Slump!

"Come on now, Hotaru-chan! We've only just started!"

The first stragglers I discovered were Asuna-chan and Hotaru-chan. Asuna-chan was an energetic, sporty girl, but Hotaru-chan was the Zashiki Warashi type. I knew that she wouldn't do well with exercise, and apparently my prediction was correct.

"What do we do now?"

"Nothing. She's faking so that she can throw in the towel."

"?!"

"That's the expression of someone who's been found out."

Even Anisha-san saw through her act, meaning the plan had failed. I decided to ask her why she'd done it.

Poke.

"Hotaru-chan, don't poke my back. I'm trying to talk to the Hotaru-chan right in front of me...?!"

“Hm?”

Hotaru-chan was behind me when I turned around. When I faced forward, the fake-tired Hotaru-chan was gone.

“...Let’s pretend we didn’t see anything.”

“Agreed.”

I had no reason to argue with Asuna-chan’s suggestion. Apparently, she’d already left Hotaru-chan behind in the bathroom at the start of the hike, and Hotaru-chan had to run after her in a panic. There was some sort of stoat following her, but I decided to pretend I never saw it. It was definitely a stoat. Definitely not a fox spirit. Nope.

“I came to check on you guys, Keikain. How’s it looking?”

“No one’s dropped out yet. I think we can all keep going.”

“We’ll be at Konpira Lookout soon, so we can take a break there. Keep it up until then.”

Mitsuya-kun returned to the front. Yuujirou-kun or someone must have asked him to check on the back.

For better or worse, Eiichi-kun was at the center of our class. I knew he must have been setting the hiking pace for everyone else at that moment.

Behind me was Anisha-san and a few guards undergoing training. They were followed by Inspector Natsume and another plainclothes detective, both of whom were sweating. I could tell the other climbers were staring at us, which was terribly embarrassing.

“Oh! What beautiful scenery.”

We arrived at Konpira Lookout. It was time to take a short break and enjoy some snacks.

“He he he! Take a look at this. Here’s something that relieves fatigue!”

I took some yokan out of my backpack—the smooth bean paste kind. Sweets were great when you were a little exhausted.

“I see. So you came prepared.”

Eiichi-kun was holding a jelly drink. That also wasn't a bad choice, as it was a simple way to get nutrients.

"I wasn't sure what to pick either, but everything seemed bulkier than I expected, so I went with these."

Yuujirou-kun was eating a balanced-nutrition square and holding a bottle of steaming black tea. All three of us looked at Mitsuya-kun to see what he would pull out next...

"Stop starin' at me."

"Ugh!"

"I feel like he has us beat."

"Yeah, there's no other way to put it."

No one's snacks held a candle to homemade onigiri from Mitsuya-kun's mother.

After this chat, our break came to an end. We had only made it a quarter of the way through our hike so far, and it was going to get harder from here.

The true mountain climbing began after we left Konpira Lookout. Despite their initial excitement, the children were now getting tired and slowing down. I stayed with the boys and girls at the very back and tried to walk slow enough that they didn't give up.

"Come on, guys. You can do it! You can do it! Let's reach Takaosan Station next."

I wiped my sweat away with a towel and checked the map. I knew it was some ways away, since we'd only just started, but it was important to muster up energy by checking your current location and the remaining distance.

I glanced at Anisha. She was wearing my backpack and I couldn't spot a single drop of sweat on her face. As much as I didn't want to admit it, she was absolutely right about carrying my backpack for me, considering my strength. I made a mental note to thank her after we went back.

"Everyone who's decided to stop is going to walk to Takaosan Station."

A teacher reported to us in the back that some students from the other classes were already throwing in the towel.

Climbing a mountain essentially came down to self-management, but as a tourist destination, Mount Takao also had cable cars running along it. One of the reasons this mountain was chosen for our trip was probably so that students would be able to give up and take the cable car down.

“Do you have a minute, Runa?”

I was walking slowly, so Eiichi-kun had waited up for me. I didn’t like the look on his face.

In other words, he had definitely just thought of something.

“What is it?”

“People in the other classes have given up. Do you think anyone in ours will join them?”

“Possibly, but most people quit because they run out of motivation or stamina and can’t get it back. As long as you prevent that, you won’t have anyone quitting.”

No one else tried to join our conversation. They had already been drained of all the willpower needed to speak.

“It’s not the physical strength that’s a problem—it’s the motivation.”

“The motivation?”

“It’s a matter of whether or not they want to push themselves hard enough to climb this mountain in the first place.”

Mountain climbing is nothing more than a battle against oneself. If you can’t convince yourself that there’s a reason to do it in the first place, nature will cut you down without mercy. Mount Takao, despite being partially a sightseeing location, was no exception.

“Could we motivate them by saying we might be the only class where no one quits?”

“That’s not quite enough. For now, let’s see how many people have quit by

the next break. What about you, Eiichi-kun? Are you going to quit?”

He smirked. I found it kind of cool how he looked so boyish when he was enjoying something.

“How long have we known each other? You really think something like this would make me give up?”

“Of course not. You can set the pace, and I’ll stay at the back to pick up stragglers.”

“Got it. I’ll send Yuujirou and Mitsuya back once in a while, so tell them if you need anything.”

“Just keep the pace steady, please. Try to go a little slower if you want to get everyone to the top.”

He nodded and went back to his place up front. After that, we reached Takaosan Station an hour after our initial departure.

“Wow, took us long enough... Huff huff...”

Lydia-senpai was probably trying to sound cool, but the attempt was ruined by her ragged breathing. She was also covered in sweat.

“Are you stopping here, Senpai?”

“Yes. I heard that tengu live here, but it seems I wasn’t invited... *Huff huff...*”

This mountain has tengu? That must mean Hotaru-chan’s thing... No, I decided not to think about it.

“Runa-oneesama!”

Mio-chan came up to us during our conversation. She seemed very energetic to me.

“Looks like you’re still feeling good, Mio-chan. Will you keep going?”

“No, everyone else is quitting, so I’m leaving too. We’re going to take the cable car down to hang out together!”

I hadn’t considered that way of thinking. She waved goodbye and went back to her friends, and Kaoru-san’s group approached me next.

“You seem energetic, Runa-san.”

“Well, I do jogging and things like that, Kaoru-san.”

She wiped her forehead with a towel. Behind her, Machiyoi-san was being held up by Kurimori-san and Takahashi-san. I could safely say that she would be heading back.

“Oh, where’s Kazuki-san?” I wondered. I hadn’t seen her today.

“She stayed home today because she said she was sick,” Kaoru-san explained as I looked for her. *This is the kind of school day you always remember being absent for.* It seemed like Kaoru-san had read my mind.

“Next time you see her, please try not to make a big deal out of it.”

“Of course.”

After that chat, I returned to my own class. Eiichi-kun was waiting for me.

“Almost half the people are dropping out here?”

“Yeah. That’s quite a lot.”

The cable car left at eight in the morning. All the people planning to take it were talking casually with each other.

I was starting to understand the situation. Most people were going to leave early, and only a few would make it to the peak. It wasn’t like we had tests to take when we returned to school, so leaving now meant that the students could spend a relaxing afternoon at home.

The appeal was hard to deny. I wondered how Eiichi-kun was going to keep morale up.

“All right, we made it!”

“Move a little bit before you rest. Your body will feel much better if you do.”

Everyone in our class followed Yuujirou-kun’s instructions and mimicked Mitsuya-kun’s cooldown routine. This made it seem like they were still motivated, but there were already multiple people looking for the right time to tell me they were ready to leave.

Eiichi-kun beat them to the punch and started talking to me.

“By the way, Runa, your outfit makes you look really motivated to climb this mountain.”

“You can tell?! I put it together because I knew I wanted to reach the top no matter what!”

I twirled around like I was in a fashion show. It sent droplets of my sweat flying, but I wiped my face dry with my towel and took a bow. It sounded like Eiichi-kun was using me as motivation. Because of our determination to climb the rest of the mountain, everyone else in our class dropped the idea of quitting.

Peer pressure was very effective in the caste system of Japanese classes. Decisions from the top carried a lot of weight and responsibility.

“I want to climb to the top with all of you!”

“Yeah! Let’s take a group picture at the peak so we can always remember it!”

We forced the decision on them as soon as it was made. First, everyone needed to hydrate.

“I’ll hand out drinks. Let me go buy them real quick...”

“My lady.”

Anisha, of course, was the one to hand me a cup of sports drink.

“I have enough for everyone. Please have some crackers and jam too, if you’d like.”

If we managed to climb the mountain with a small platoon, we would have plenty of supplies left for later. That was why she prepared enough for everyone.

“Thanks, Anisha. Please have some too, everyone.”

“Thank you, Miss Maid!” the students chorused.

“You’re welcome.”

We were probably the reason why our classmates were polite enough to thank a maid. I was particularly responsible for it. I always thanked my maids like this, and the others felt obligated to do the same. Even if it was just the

people in my class, it was surely a good thing for Japan's future that these sons and daughters of nobles and zaibatsu had taken on this habit. Probably.

"Ah. Give the officers with us some drinks and crackers too, please."

"Of course, my lady."

We left Takaosan Station at 7:20 a.m. The climb was only going to get more intense from there.

Sometime after leaving Takaosan Station, we spotted the famous landmark known as the Octopus Cedar. The tree's roots branched out like an octopus, and it was currently fenced off because so many people tried to touch it to gain good fortune. It was also over 450 years old.

"Let's pay our respects."

We all folded our hands together in prayer before heading out again. Seeing famous places like this were a nice way to restore our motivation.

As we started walking, Yuujirou-kun came up to me.

"Do you have a minute? I wanted to check in about the fork up ahead..."

I looked at my map and confirmed that there was a fork coming up. The two paths were labeled "hard slope," which was a 108-step staircase, and "easy slope," which was a bit longer in distance. There was no need for us to overexert ourselves.

"Let's go with the easy slope. We can take the hard one on the way back down."

"Understood. I'll tell Eiichi-kun."

He went back to the front, and after some time, we reached the Joshin-mon Gate. Past this, we would enter the territory of Yakuouin Temple. Mount Takao used to be worshiped as a holy mountain and sacred ground. These days, it was more commonly visited as a tourist destination, but the first trail that we chose to climb included a stop at the temple along the way.

I watched people coming down from the mountain bowing to the gate before they continued. Once I crossed through to the other side, it felt as if the atmosphere had changed.

“Huh? I feel like I can see Hotaru-chan so clearly.”

“?”

I pretended that I hadn't heard Asuna-chan's comment. Also, I was quietly convincing myself that the stoat attached to Hotaru-chan was nothing more than my imagination.

“I was wondering, Keikain, why did you decide to come on this trip?”

Mitsuya-kun came to talk to me next after we passed through Joshin-mon Gate. I appreciated how the three boys seemed concerned about me and wanted to keep checking in.

“I could have skipped it if I wanted to, but wouldn't that be a waste? The air here is so clear and lovely.”

“That's true... You can't get air like this in the city.”

From behind him, Anisha was looking on with a face that seemed to be saying *“But you can get all the clean air you want in Hokkaido!”* I pretended not to notice.

I knew it was a selfish thought, but I wanted all of us to experience this air together. I wiped the sweat from my brow with a towel.

“I'm sure we'll never forget what we see up ahead. I didn't want to miss this opportunity.”

“Even though more than half of the people dropped out because they didn't care to see it?”

Mitsuya-kun sounded slightly out of breath too. He was clearly getting tired.

“I don't think there's any harm in seeing what it looks like. Especially when you get it for walking so far on your own two feet.”

Well, it could still definitely be a pain. Our path was a two-hour course, so by the time we got back, we would have been climbing the mountain for four hours. It was tempting to snap out of my trance and question why I was doing this at all.

“Sorry, Keikain, but I don't really get what you mean.”

“Then ask me again once we’ve climbed all the way up the mountain. I think we’ll find our answer.”

We took the easy slope at the fork in the road and arrived at Yakuouin Temple, which was built 1,200 years ago under the official name of Takaosan Yakuouin Yuukiji. We were going to rest here, but before that, I went up to greet the temple with a prayer.

“You never skip the formalities in these situations, do you, Runa?”

When they saw what I was doing, Eiichi-kun, our other classmates, and even Anisha followed suit and offered their own prayers. *Ah, Anisha is offering a thick envelope to that temple worker. That must be payment for bothering them like this.* I looked around at my camo-clad bodyguards who kept appearing from time to time and let out a loud sigh.

“When in Rome, I suppose. Just look at me.”

I brushed back my blonde hair back to show it off. Though I looked a lot like a foreign tourist, I was fundamentally Japanese. As a minority both inside and outside Japan, it was hard not to sense the malice coming from the character known as Keikain Runa.

“Still, people always want to connect with others.”

At this point, there was really no difference between quitting here and going back down together after making it to the peak. The people who’d failed to speak up and quit were still following us, some out of resignation, some out of stubbornness, and a few with an ulterior motive of getting closer to Eiichi-kun and me.

“Has anyone hurt their legs? If your body doesn’t feel right when you’re stretching, please let me know.”

Our teacher was pretty shocked to see everyone still sticking it out. They must have expected half of us to drop out like the other classes.

“Be sure to stay hydrated, everyone. Keikain-san’s maid will provide you with sports drinks, so please don’t hesitate to drink up.”

“Are you ready? We’ve made it this far, and the peak is just ahead. Let’s all

climb it together!”

“All right! Let’s all make it there!”

When I was praying at Yakuouin, this was what entered my mind:

God... No, Buddha, I suppose.

Why do I exist?

I can’t play the role I was given as a villainess.

This country is so much like the one from my past life, yet I won’t meet the same fate I did there.

Where am I supposed to go? What am I supposed to do?

Once I climbed the stairs at Yakuouin, the road ahead looked like a real mountain path.

Sweat was pouring out of me.

My breathing was out of sync.

God... No, Buddha.

Is it really all right for someone like me to exist?

Am I allowed to change history?

“Look at that! Come here, Runa! What an amazing view!”

It was the final step. Eiichi-kun took my hand and guided me to the peak of the mountain. From there, I could see Mount Fuji, the Kanto plains in the morning light, and the sea of skyscrapers in Tokyo. The morning sky was a brilliant blue, and I felt incredibly small in the face of such vast nature.

“What’s wrong, Runa? You’re crying!”

“I know. It’s just so moving.”

“I know what you mean. I’m so glad we made it up here!”

I had found myself doubting my very life, which felt like something loaned to me. I’d viewed this borrowed life of mine as a role I needed to play, but the world was teaching me just how tiny my existence really was.

“So it’s all right for me to live freely after all...”

The words slipped from my lips. Eiichi-kun just smiled at me.

“Right. We have our freedom, at least as long as we can smile like this.”

It was such a natural concept, but it made me so happy. My feelings of both accomplishment and fatigue were making me more excited than usual. I cried, laughed, and rejoiced over the small victory of coming this far with everyone.

“Hey, everyone! Let’s take a group picture!”

At Asuna-chan’s suggestion, Eiichi-kun moved over to Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun while I stood with Asuna-can and Hotaru-chan. Anisha took the picture for us.

“Look this way, everyone! Say cheese!”

Snap!

If only that had been the end of our trip.



But making it to the top of the mountain is only half of the journey. In other words, we had to go back down the same route we came up.

“Would you like to take the cable car, my lady?”

How could you blame me and the rest of my classmates for giving in to such an enticing offer?

Amane Mio had three big sisters. They weren't related by blood, but even after she graduated kindergarten, she always called them “Onesama” and idolized them. The oldest sister was Keikain Runa. She sometimes acted immaturely, but adults bowed their heads to her and called her “Your Little Majesty.” She was always a loving sister to Mio, giving her the very special treatment of allowing her to visit her manor in Den-en-chofu as well as her new residence, Kudanshita Keika Tower.

Mio's next sister was Kasugano Asuna, the “straight man” of the almost-sisters and the one who urged them to try new things. She was raised as the daughter of a politician, giving her a better understanding of the human spirit than Keikain Runa, although she rarely used that skill around her. Mio believed that she secretly saw Keikain Runa as an example of someone not to imitate and was polishing her interpersonal skills even more because of this.

One day after school, the two girls got into a grand and terrible fight over the last slice of mandarin pie made by Keikain Runa's head chef at Kudanshita Keika Tower, but Mio simply watched them with a smile, as this was an everyday occurrence.

The final sister was Kaihouin Hotaru. She looked like a Japanese doll and never spoke a word. But the almost-sisters had grown used to communicating telepathically, so, mysteriously enough, they knew what she was saying anyway. In a strange development, she had recently started taking care of a pet stoat.

“Ah, you want some more tea?”

Nod.

Sometimes Hotaru even used the leftover pie disputes to snatch a piece for herself. If anything, she was probably the cleverest of all of Mio's sisters.

"Ah! Hotaru-chan took our pie again!"

"And she's hiding now too! How cowardly!"

"Sing, Runa-chan! Hotaru-chan will come out if you sing!"

"Okay, leave it to me! This is why I bought that karaoke machine!"

It was important to note that these four were doing homework before the pie dispute broke out. It wasn't as if the maids were ignoring them, either.

"May I ask what you're doing, young ladies?"

Aki-san, the maid who brought out an extra pie, was often on the receiving end of deep, apologetic bows from the two older sisters.

But in the end, the four girls always had a fun time eating their pie together.

"A haunted house?"

"Right! Teisei Department Stores are hosting haunted houses for a summer event, and I've got tickets. Want to go?"

Keikain Runa waved the tickets in the air after they finished their homework. She had four tickets in total, which seemed to indicate she was planning to go with the other three girls. Kasugano Asuna naturally went in for a retort.

"Aren't you supposed to invite a boy to that sort of thing? You cling to him and cry 'I'm scared!'"

"Well, that's fine and all, but I actually don't handle things like haunted houses very well. Wouldn't it be pathetic if I ran away or passed out before we even went inside?"

Keikain Runa could handle fantasy stories, but not horror, due to her real-life fantasy experience of reincarnation, although the other three had no idea about that.

She was particularly terrified of Japanese horror and had once hoped to do away with her trauma by watching a Japanese horror movie, but she'd ended up unable to sleep alone that night and needing to have a maid walk her to the

bathroom. That was her real motive for going to the haunted house.

“That’s fine with me. We’ll have Hotaru-chan too, after all.”

With that strange reasoning, Kasugano Asuna agreed, and Kaihouin Hotaru nodded as well.

“I would like to go too, Oneesama,” said Mio, who had no reason to refuse at this point. And so, it became a trip for all four girls.

That was how they came to arrive at the haunted house the next weekend.

One of them was completely pale in the face right off the bat, but the youngest sister was kind enough not to stare.

“Runa-chan? Are you okay?”

“I-I-I-I-I’m fine. This is nothing!”

She hadn’t needed to do this, but only the day before, she had watched a horror movie to try to build up her tolerance to fright. All it did was traumatize her further, and she was now genuinely terrified. She’d even had nightmares. Between her fear and her lack of sleep, she was on the verge of passing out.

Kasugano Asuna, who was going to go along with Runa, glanced over in one direction.

“It looks like that’s the side without any monsters.”

“I want to ask how you can have a haunted house without monsters, but right now I’m just happy to hear it. I’ll follow you.”

Runa’s capable secretary, Angela, was adjusting the difficulty level for her. As a matter of fact, it was Angela who’d selected the previous night’s horror movie. She had come to love Japanese movies due to her long residence in the country.

“L-L-L-Let’s go! Asuna-chan!”

“Ow! That hurts! You’re squeezing my hand too tight, Runa-chan!”

A thought crossed Mio’s mind. The very first scare alone would probably be too much for Runa. Sure enough, that prediction came true just one minute later.

“KYAAAAAAAAAH!”

Keikain Runa burst out of the entrance to the haunted house, wailing as she dragged Kasugano Asuna behind her.

“Waaah... That was so scary... I was sooo scared...”

“So scared that you ran back out at the first surprise? You dragged me with you too!”

Keikain Runa clung to Angela and wept while Kasugano Asuna wore a stunned look on her face after the forced exit. Angela comforted the oldest sister even as she glared at the haunted house staff for making it too scary. However, scaring people was their job, and they’d never expected her to run away from the very first surprise. Mio and Kaihouin Hotaru, who were supposed to go next, didn’t know what to do now.

Nod?

“Are you saying you want to go? What should we do?”

Tug! Tug!

“You really want to go, huh? Should we get to it?”

Despite the calm expression on her face, the youngest of Mio’s sisters was very curious and playful.

They entered the haunted house and reached the first scare.

“Eek!”

“!”

It was a typical kind of trick where a scary monster face appeared as a mirror reflection inside a dim room. It arrived with a scream too, of course. However, it definitely wasn’t anything worth running back to the entrance for like their eldest sister had done.

They continued deeper and deeper into the haunted house, experiencing the frights along the way. Jack-o’-lanterns in a graveyard. A tepid wind. Skeletons and corpse-like dolls.

“Eek!”

“!”

The final surprise was a cliched ghost in a white sheet. It appeared to be floating, probably with the use of a rope suspending it from above. The ghost pointed toward the exit.

“That’s the exit, huh? Thank you very much.”

“!”

Mio turned back around in front of the door, but the ghost was gone.

The two girls exited the haunted house.

“Mio-chan! Were you scared? Did the monsters make you cry?”

“You’re not going to be very comforting after you ran out crying, Runa-chan...”

Runa had apparently been worried about how long they took inside. Mio and Hotaru laughed at the two oldest sisters.

“We’re all right. A friendly ghost showed us where the exit was at the end.”

The staff cocked their heads when they heard that. Mio managed to overhear part of their conversation.

“A ghost? But we took all the ghosts out so they wouldn’t scare the young lady.”

Mio looked at Kaihouin Hotaru, but she had the same blank look on her face. She knew telling the others would only frighten Runa-oneesama even more, so she pretended she hadn’t heard anything at all.

Bonus:

“Runa, I have tickets to a haunted house if you want to—”

“No way! Absolutely not!”

Glossary and notes

Systema: Russian military hand-to-hand combat.

KKK: A white supremacist organization which gathered power long ago in the southern United States.

Texans: Texas is a Republican stronghold where the National Rifle Association lobbies Republican lawmakers based on a strong opposition to gun control.

The place where Runa swam: Star Sand Beach. It's located behind Andersen Air Force Base, but it can't be used anymore.

Akasaka Gochoume Mini-Marathon: A famous event from TBS's *All Star Kanshasai*.

The movie they watched: *Otoko wa Tsurai yo*.

Pilgrims: The first Americans in the stories of the country's founding.

America's elites: The people referred to as "Old Money" who have amassed generational wealth.

You can do it! You can do it!: Created by Ito Life-sensei. Apparently, we can use it however we like, but his usually end with a heart symbol.

Chapter 5:

Okazaki Yuuichi's Job

“TODAY’S GUEST is Tachibana Ryuuji-san, managing director of Keika Railway. Thank you very much for attending today. May I ask why you specifically asked for me to be the commentator at this event?”

“I didn’t have any real reason in mind. I just felt like the usual commentator might have too many pointed questions that I couldn’t answer.”

(The commentator in the back calls out)

“That’s not true, Tachibana-san.”

“All right, I’ll stop with the jokes. I intend to answer any question I can.”

“Then let’s start with something light. I was born in Kansai. Right now, Keika Railway is building new lines all around Japan. Are you planning anything else in the Kansai region aside from the platform expansion at Shin-Osaka Station?”

“Ha ha ha! I had a feeling that was coming. Is this about the Naniwasuji Line? We’re thinking about what we want to do next, but that’s all I can say at the moment.”

“As a Kansai native, I’m very glad to hear you say that. I’ll be sure to ask you about it whenever I see you.”

“Did I say too much?”

(The commentator looks at the camera)

“I’ve been told to move on, so let’s get to the next question. Keika Railway got into the railroad business after an acquisition, and now you are proceeding with railway construction as the operator of the third-biggest company in the industry. Perhaps those from Kansai are familiar with the private Kobe-Sannomiya railway, which, to put it simply, lends its lines to other railroad companies and manages them.”

“The initial plan was to buy Shin-Tokiwa Railway. We started by purchasing

KYOSHO Rapid Railway as a way of gaining some know-how, but then we also acquired Kagawa Railroad during the bailout of Sougou Department Stores. The Shikoku Shinkansen, Shin-Osaka Station platform expansion, and Shinjuku Shinkansen all came easily after that.”

(The commentator in the back calls out)

“But aren’t people saying you used a massive amount of political leverage to set up that shinkansen project?”

“I don’t deny that they say that, but railway work is a huge industry that eats up hundreds of billions of yen at a time. And despite all that, we lost the presidential election.”

(The room falls silent at this counterattack)

“This will be my biggest question while I have you here today. We associate the Keika Group with capitalizing on the IT bubble, dealing with bad debts, and buying up company after company. I’m sorry to put it like this, but why are you spending such incredible amounts of money on all of these projects?”

“Well, then I’m sorry to respond like this, but we essentially won the lottery and had no core business to work around. We used corporate buyouts to obtain that core, and we also wanted to be seen as trustworthy. That’s how the railway came to be.”

“As I recall, Kansai private railway zaibatsu’s territories border each other rather snugly. Despite this, couldn’t you have held on to that sum of cash which was bigger than a lottery payout?”

“When the IT bubble began, from 1995 to 2000, the Keika Group’s assets were over 10 trillion yen in total. This rapid expansion was brought about by IT stocks, Russian bonds, and the rise in crude oil prices. I’m sure you all understand why the stock myth collapsed. That was why we began considering liquidation and transferred assets into resources we obtained from a contract with Russia during their financial crisis. At the same time, we entered the railroad business in order to help improve the country and gain more trust. It won’t skyrocket suddenly like IT stocks, but the Keika Group believes that this will still be a vital business for us ten or twenty years from now.”

“It’s difficult to leave easy money on the table.”

“Indeed. That was the value in the railroad business, which doesn’t disappear so easily. Keika Railway has already invested roughly a trillion yen into the project, and including construction fees for the Shinjuku Shinkansen, this comes out to more than 2 trillion yen by our estimates. After the bubble, private railway companies in Kansai were saddled with trillions in interest-bearing debt, and they only continue to hold out due to the daily influx of cash and the fact that they haven’t introduced current-value accounting. Parts of the Koizumi cabinet have announced their intentions to use that type of accounting, although right now that could lead to a financial crisis similar to those in Russia or Asia.”

(The commentator in the back calls out)

“Current-value accounting ruins cross-shareholding, so wouldn’t the zaibatsu oppose it in order to survive?”

“I can’t deny that. At the same time, everyone here only knows half of the story. Releasing shares, which means selling them off, enables anyone else to buy them. Who ends up acquiring them when it’s all over? The Keika Group alone is valued at over 10 trillion yen. I believe the only groups capable of raising that amount of money would be American hedge funds.”

“Um...are you becoming famous as an outspoken shareholder?”

“I think the Japanese public is more familiar with the names of vulture funds.”

(The commentator in the back calls out)

“The center of the Keika Group was Keika Pharmaceuticals, which is now set to merge with Iwazaki Pharma. You’ve also put together a few other mergers and absorptions with the Iwazaki zaibatsu. Is the same outcome on the table for Keika Railway?”

“I won’t deny that the Keika Group is going through internal restructuring. However, we plan to keep Keika Railway, Keika Holdings, and Akamatsu Corporation as our support pillars.”

(The commentator in the back calls out)

“You want to be seen as trustworthy, and yet Keika Group retains a PMC, which is seen as an endorsement of zaibatsu private armies. What do you have to say about that?!”

“I believe you’re referring to Kitakaba Security. We are expanding our operations in anticipation of changes to the gated community security and security industry laws. This also relates to the railroad business. The government appears to be taking action to bring back railway police officers, and placing them under the control of the police will maintain public safety personnel—”

“Thank you very much for joining us today, Tachibana-san. After this commercial, we’ll cover the scandal rocking the Ministry of Finance and their private slush funds. We aim to take a look at the improper payments dealt out to noble ambassadors, diplomats, and consuls.”

The man turned off his TV and let out a yawn. Tokyo, which was ahead of him due to the time difference, seemed to be as peaceful as ever.

The lights in the skyscrapers outside of his window continued to twinkle despite the rise of the morning sun.

This was the New York branch office of Keika Holdings, located on Wall Street. It was also a base for the Moonlight Fund.

The Moonlight Fund had first become known for expanding its wealth as an early player in the IT bubble, but at this point, they were constantly producing great fortunes after purchasing resources at record-low prices due to the Russian financial crisis. They then poured these profits back into Japanese bad debts in what seemed like an endless cycle of wasted money.

This was the Moonlight Fund’s money-making process. Their profits from things like US high-tech stocks came in dollars, which were then used as capital to purchase resources from Russian oil companies. The material they bought came not just from within Russia, but also from Russian-held mining and natural resource companies outside of the country too.

These purchases were made in dollars, which is how the stock profits were

spent. Then the resources were brought to Japan and sold there for yen. This meant there was no need to convert yen to dollars to purchase resources, and by preventing some outflow of yen overseas, the funds to purchase Japanese companies didn't need to be sent outside the country.

With the yen they acquired, they bought up the bad debts of many struggling Japanese companies and bolstered their stock prices. Most of the Moonlight Fund's bailouts were directed toward former Northern Japanese companies that had no other chance of survival. Her Little Majesty came into the sight of many desperate eyes.

The easy money was quickly spent on newly issued shares to eliminate bad debts. Naturally, a company's stock price rose when its debts were paid, so while the process was less efficient, it still ensured that profits would rise while also safeguarding the economy and employees. Resource prices trended upward along with crude oil, which was what allowed this trick to function.

Another important factor was that the Keika Group, the Moonlight Fund's banker, covered the costs for the entire process.

Akamatsu Corporation purchased and sold resources, Keika Shipping handled their transportation, Keika Chemicals refined the crude oil, and Keika Holdings covered the currency exchange and insurance.

Keika Shipping and Keika Chemicals were going to merge with companies from the Iwazaki zaibatsu, but that wasn't likely to interfere with the Moonlight Fund's system.

"Please make a deal with us."

"Please, we need you to support our fund!"

"I promise we'll be profitable! So please listen to what we have to say..."

"I want to speak to your director..."

The New York branch of Keika Holdings had an endless stream of visitors asking the same thing. It was a daily event to see them leaving in low spirits.

The traders' job was to assist with loans and payments to Japanese companies that had expanded into the United States, gather information from

within Wall Street, and make grounded, less showy trades.

While the Moonlight Fund had a tremendous success rate, they mostly limited their investments to mainstream outlets. In other words, they generally rejected short-term trades, instead focusing on buying cheap stocks and holding them for long periods of time.

The Keika Securities side of things made their own share of showy trades, but that wasn't their principal operation. Their deals were much more reserved than those of other vulture funds, keeping their risk to a minimum.

"The interbank market has calmed down quite a bit now. Just recently, there was a Japanese premium and everything."

"The world must finally be ready to deal with bad debts for good."

The voice of the trader in the operating room had a calming effect to it. This was because the Japanese banks that had been struggling with massive debts were now undergoing major mergers and beginning to tackle the problem, and also because these major financial institutions had survived the threat of bankruptcy.

However, surviving as institutions didn't exempt them from major corporate restructuring. The Keika Group was also the one employing many of the staff members in charge of those banking layoffs.

Their CEO, Ichijou Susumu, capitalized on the weakness of his own faction in the company by hiring Wall Street workers ousted during the Russian financial crisis, bringing them to Tokyo, and putting them in charge of restructuring.

Ichijou Susumu originally worked at the regional Far Eastern Bank, and with the powerful factor of the national bank policies that were crafted to bail out failing financial institutions, there was a fierce battle to succeed him as CEO. That meant there were none of the original workers left there who could be put in charge of the restructuring.

When Ichijou brought in his own faction from his previous position along with the newly added foreigners, Keika Holdings was internally rejuvenated. With no other CEO to be found, his influence grew.

However, there were also constant rumors that he was disposing of

personnel, sending them to other banks.

“It’s all about Her Little Majesty. No matter what happens to CEO Ichijou, she’s always going to call the next shots.”

Wall Street was the largest money exchange in the world and a banquet for those vultures. The people who worked there weren’t idiots.

At the very least, Wall Street businessmen were trying to understand the person known as Keikain Runa even more than she was.

“They’re giving her special seats at the new president’s inauguration.”

“I heard that not only did the queen make a large donation to him, but she also had a hand in the Florida results.”

“She’s actually from a dukedom, but it sounds like people really do want to make her a queen or an empress.”

They kept up the chatter, but their eyes remained on their monitors and their fingers stayed on their keyboards.

Keika Holdings had invested quite a sum into IT to produce an algorithmic trading system that was far ahead of what other financial institutions had. Along with the internet banking that had exploded in popularity around the entire United States, it was a big performer throughout North America.

These features made Keika Holdings a target to many rivals beyond just Japanese banks.

“That reminds me. What happened to the water business she was supposed to open in California?”

“The one she was going to do with General Energy Online? The talks just aren’t making any progress. General Energy Online is on board, but Akamatsu Corporation is in charge and they’re being quite cautious.”

“It will take a long time to get the environmental issues cleared, and that area is GEO’s home turf. You have to be especially cautious with this sort of thing.”

“The Democrats are the ones more concerned about the environment, and California is a Democrat stronghold. She’s just too cozy with the Republicans.”

“Plus, the Moonlight Fund got out of IT stocks and switched to natural resources. The California water business will probably become the next big thing after crude oil.”

The Moonlight Fund had sold off most of its IT stocks, leaving only a few to pay for the bad debts in Japan that Wall Street so thoroughly mocked.

They then changed their portfolio to natural resources. A while later, the world would be shocked by their clever escape from the bursting of the IT bubble.

“Now that I think of it, I heard something odd recently.”

“What’s that?”

“You said people want to make her a queen. Her Majesty is high up in the line of succession to the Romanov family, right? There’re people trying to set her up as the head of the family and send Russia into chaos.”

“Who’s behind that scheme?”

“The right-wing Russian politicians and oligarchs. The last administration was too greedy, so they’re worried about being overthrown. That’s why they’re fighting with Japan to have North Karafuto returned to them, even though Japan’s just laughing them off.”

“Of course they are. Do they know how much work Her Majesty did under the Fuchigami, Izumikawa, and even Hayashi regimes? Even people here call her the ‘Secret Bank Revival President.’”

They were really only joking, but this sort of thing couldn’t be entirely treated as a joke. As people who worked on Wall Street, a place where anything and everything was seen as potential money, they knew what it meant to hear these sorts of rumors.

“Either way, things are probably going to get shady.”

The man left the office while the others’ conversation went in one ear and out the other. He entered a random café, picked up his morning coffee, and read over a collection of news stories that had been given to him.

“Keika Railway has announced a price reduction for KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co. The former KYOSHO Rapid Railway was in the red due to massive interest costs amassed from construction fees, but the resulting buyout thanks to an increase in customers eliminated this burden and swiftly brought them into the black. Their next big leap is a reduction in prices. In related news, Shin-Tokiwa Railway Company, currently under construction, will be extending to East Japan Imperial Railway and Kita-Senju Station. Akihabara Station, the temporary terminal, has constructed a two-directional four-line platform with a train turntable. They also plan to connect to all Tokyo Station platform lines...”

“A groundbreaking ceremony was held at Shin-Sakaide Station after provisional work began on the Shikoku Shinkansen Okayama to Shin-Sakaide line. The Shikoku Shinkansen, funded entirely by Keika Railway, is the first private shinkansen of its kind. An extension is planned to Takamatsu. However, Keika Railway is said to be focusing on completing the provisional work on the Okayama to Shin-Sakaide line, for which it was easy to secure the construction site. Cross-platform transfers are now possible at Shin-Sakaide Station due to this work, and until the Takamatsu extension is completed in two years, trains to Shin-Osaka will depart twice every hour while stops at Okayama will occur at the same rate. Meanwhile, Keika Railway has also purchased three eight-car 700-series trains and turned them over to West Japan Imperial Railway. After additions to the Shin-Osaka platforms, they plan to purchase another two trains and hire employees to help them run between Shin-Osaka, Shin-Kobe, Okayama, Shin-Sakaide, and Takamatsu. As public works projects continue to be completed in anticipation of the World Cup, construction for other World Cup-related projects such as the railroad connecting Oita Airport and the Shinjuku Shinkansen is expected to continue until after the event due to the Koizumi administration’s structural reform, earning criticism from the opposition...”

“Akamatsu Corporation is accelerating its business in Central Asia. They are accepting orders from the Republic of Tajikistan for water resources and power grid service and have announced they will be partnering with a major Russian corporation in the refining of aluminum. The company also announced a deal

with the Republic of Uzbekistan. Estimates of the combined costs of both sides in this venture are in the tens of billions of yen. Both businesses have built a branch office in the Uzbekistan capital of Tashkent, where they will join forces and where employees are already being sent to work...”

“Teisei Department Stores have gone public on the Imperial Stock Exchange at a price of 3,156 yen per share. After coming under the management of the Keika Group due to their financial difficulties, Teisei reorganized their administration, bailed out Hizen Co., Ltd. and Sougou Department Stores, and became a major name in the field of goods distribution. This public listing freed up the 49 percent of stock owned by Keika Bank, netting an estimated profit of a few hundred billion yen. These funds are planned to be used as working capital for the Keika Group, and there are discussions of Keika Hotel and Teisei Department Stores, centered around Keika Railway, being used as holding companies...”

“Management at Shiyo Electric Co. is experiencing rapid restructuring. Demand for small liquid crystals, the company’s main investment, has skyrocketed due to the explosive popularity of cellular phones, earning them their highest sales in history. However, due to past debt dealings such as hiding losses, the company wants to proceed with this process and will come out with net earnings of over 10 billion yen. Shiyo is concentrating its investments in liquid crystal and batteries, withdrawing from the organic electroluminescence industry, and purchasing nickel battery businesses...”

“Construction of the Kudanshita Keika Tower has been completed, and the businesses set to work out of each floor are already preparing to move in. The core tenant is the Kudanshita Keika Hotel, a luxury establishment where a single night’s stay will cost three hundred thousand yen. It’s already a much-anticipated destination for celebrities from around the world. The large hall is also fully furnished and is set to be a regular venue for the Keika Opera Company. The hotel will contain a Kudanshita Keika Bank branch office, Keika Railway headquarters, a Tokyo Moonlight Fund base, and the Akamatsu

Corporation's resource management department. Kitakaba Security, one of the much-discussed PMCs, will also have a base in the tower. The Keika Group will be using the building as their main reception hall, and the top floor is designated as Keikain Runa's personal residence, complete with an outdoor garden on the roof. On the first floor, Café Vesuna will be a place to experience waitress service at the hands of Russian maids and is highly anticipated by fans of the Akihabara maid cafés that are making the news. They have also purchased the Kudanshita Kyomei Bank building that sits diagonally across from Kudanshita Keika Tower and are planning on redevelopment..."

"Mind if I sit here, Mr. Okazaki?"

"By all means."

The smiling Chinese man who had called out to Okazaki Yuuichi sat down in front of him. He was a most valuable information dealer who provided details about behind-the-scenes matters. Okazaki handed the man an envelope. He opened it and counted the stack of hundred-dollar bills inside.

"Looks like business is good at the Moonlight Fund, not that I'm surprised."

"Well, if someone's trying to hurt the young lady who owns us, I need to look into it. What did you find?"

"All signs point to guilt. A load of put options were bought on the New York Stock Exchange that same day, but they went through multiple funds, so I couldn't tell where it started."

Put options were a type of contract used in short selling. In other words, someone had shorted the company, expecting Keikain Runa to be assassinated at her birthday party.

"Well? You're looking into the source, right? Don't I pay you enough?"

The man cracked a smile at Okazaki's questions. Quietly, he continued, this time in Cantonese instead of English.

"I think it came out of London, but that was just a connection point, and before that it came from Singapore. They're a different race and religion from

us. I'm sure you understand where I'm going, sir."

"Ah, I see. Singapore is an overseas base for both China and Southeast Asia as a whole. They're still holding a grudge over the hit they took in the Asian currency crisis."

Malaysia and Indonesia were two countries that had suffered major damage during the financial crisis. Both were Muslim nations. Singapore was also a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, and the Middle East used Malaysia and Pakistan to send their money to London through Singapore. The people of the two countries had also suffered during the crisis thanks to the dealings of hedge funds.

"It's not like I don't understand, but why the girl?"

"Can you really ask that? You, the one who squashed the Russian coup d'état?"

The Chinese man's eyes opened a bit wider, and his voice told of his exasperation.

"Ah, so that's what it was. I see now."

The disarray of the Russian government would benefit the Chechen guerrilla fighters, who were struggling against Russia in the Chechen War and had ties to Islamic extremists.

"Let's get down to business, then."

The Chinese man emphasized those words as he switched to the main topic, this time speaking Japanese. His lips were smiling, but his eyes looked deadly serious.

"The assassination attempt on the young lady may have just been a rehearsal."

"A what?!"

Okazaki had to gulp his coffee down to contain his shock over those unexpected words. The other man didn't seem to notice that the coffee in the cup was trembling.

"When I looked into it, I saw that another huge batch of put options were

purchased. I think they probably came from the same place that bought them before the assassination attempt...”

“I’m sure they did. All right, let me know if anything else comes up.”

“Likewise. Say hello to the old man in Hong Kong for me.”

With that, the Chinese man was on his way. Okazaki stayed behind at the table and called the waiter over to refill his coffee, recalling the person the Chinese man spoke of.

I loved to gamble. Or, to be more accurate, I liked taking risks. The reason I aimed to get into an imperial university was because it was the riskiest college. The reason I joined a low-level general trading company like Matsuno Trading Corporation was because it seemed to be on the verge of going under. I never expected it to survive and become Akamatsu Corporation.

Even if I lost my bets, I knew I had the confidence and talents to get by.

The year was 2000. The city of Macau, which was returned to Communist China along with Hong Kong, was currently receiving investments as a burgeoning casino city. I was there in an underground casino, trying to make my first bet.

“Blackjack.”

I flipped my cards, revealing a king and an ace of spades. Since this place had no limits on bets, I’d started at ten thousand dollars and played blackjack until I was up to a million in total. Everyone in the casino was watching my cards. *This is good enough bait for now.*

“Cash me out. Just ten grand is fine.”

“Huh?”

It’s very important to control the mood in the room while you’re gambling. There were already scary men standing by in the back, and if I wanted to go home with all those chips, I would need to come up with another idea. But I wasn’t here to think up such cheap tricks.

“What, you thought I was going to cash it all out? I’m just here because I like

to gamble. That's it. I figured it was rude to say I didn't need any of it back..."

I kept everyone's eyes on me as I grabbed a hundred-dollar chip. Ten thousand, one hundred dollars. That was today's winnings.

"I'll take enough for dinner, at least. Anyone know where I can get some good chicken?"

The casino couldn't touch me when I was being so open about making a deal. If they came for me now, the underworld would gain a horrible reputation for hurting a man who gave up his money and showed mercy to the casino.

The dealer kept that strained smile on his face as he told me about a certain Chinese restaurant. It turned out to be incredibly delicious. They served Cantonese food because of their location, and as I ate my meal of a whole roasted chicken, a group of men with scary faces surrounded my table. The restaurant was actually a headquarters for the mafia that ran the same underground casino.

"Can you wait a minute? This chicken is really tasty, and I don't want to waste it."

The man the others referred to as "Bro" smiled when he heard me speak first.

"I know you're the man who threw away a million dollars. Tell us what you're after."

My life could be in danger if I said the wrong thing here, and yet I was even more pumped up than I'd been when I was gambling earlier. I slowly pulled two business cards out of my pocket and placed them on the table. I wasn't entirely sure if the criminal underworld was familiar with the culture of business cards, but I knew that they would at least be able to see my name.

"What are these?"

"Take those business cards and show them to your boss. He'll understand the names."

Akamatsu Corporation Managing Director Toudou Nagayoshi

Akamatsu Corporation Consultant Tachibana Ryuuji

These two men hadn't given me their cards, but I hadn't stolen them, either. The source was simple. I merely printed the text on our blank company business cards. Although their titles were accurate, their phone numbers and addresses were actually those of the company. If the mafiosi were questioned about it, they couldn't come clean and say they got them from a man who gave up a million yen at a casino, so they couldn't be pressed about it too deeply. Japanese secretarial divisions were used to turning these kinds of people away too.

I would play up the fact that I worked with these people, ask their conditions, and when they put in a phone call, they would learn that the two men did belong to Akamatsu Corporation.

At that point, their names would do the rest of the work for me. I continued to eat my meal, still surrounded by the suspicious men, when a gentle-looking old man approached us. The others stiffened, and I knew he had to be one of the big bosses.

"It looks like you enjoyed the food."

"I did. You can't be a bad person and make good food. Not in my book, anyway."

"I see."

The others moved toward the wall so that the old man could sit across from me.

A chef brought out yum cha for us.

"Are those two doing well?"

"They're as active as ever. As you can see from their cards, President Toudou is the director of a Japanese general trading company and Tachibana-san is the butler for the young lady in charge."

"I'm very glad to hear that Tachibana-san is doing well."

Criminal or not, anyone at the top in Hong Kong would recognize their names. Communist China won the Chinese Civil War but struggled to build the country

after that. Oil was absolutely vital in developing modern industries. After losing Manchuria, they desperately needed a way to obtain oil.

Great Britain ended up forcing the sale of oil to China in deals based out of Hong Kong. Tankers with crude oil from the Middle East were picked up by Hong Kong and dropped off in Shanghai or Tokyo. The legendary Japanese dealer who supported the Far East's oil prices from Hong Kong was named Toudou Nagayoshi.

Tachibana Ryuuji's name also carried weight in the Hong Kong underworld. During the Vietnam War, he oversaw managing and restricting the prolific drug trade that centered around the US military. After the war ended, he handed over the entire network to the Hong Kong underworld. You would probably be called an outsider if you didn't know the name of Tachibana Ryuuji, the "Hungry Wolf from the Far East."

"Those two are looking for direct subordinates, and I'm the test subject right now. I have to find leads they'll be happy to hear about."

"Oh ho. A million dollars definitely isn't enough to please either of them."

With that, we switched to the main topic. My entire plan had been to get the attention of someone at the top to confirm my findings.

I shuddered. I could hardly take the thrill—the *risk* of this moment.

"Russian weapon imports are slowing down, aren't they?"

I'd learned that the weapons from the former Northern Japanese army remaining in Karafuto were going for a high price overseas.

After the Cold War, weapons standards started shifting to the West. But Karafuto-made weapons, which were known for being high in quality and functionality, had become more expensive due to their rarity. Lately, people who worked at these marketplaces had found the sudden increase a bit strange. The biggest customer for these Eastern-made weapons was Communist China, which used them to suppress the Manchurian people. When Chinese military officials came to Hong Kong to purchase more weapons, they were shocked by the increase too.

Russian-made weapons, particularly those sold on the black market, usually

came from the country's army. That meant one thing: something must have happened to put them in a situation where they couldn't sell off weapons.

"I played at some other casinos too and spotted a Russian seat-filler making a big show of how he was losing money."

A casino and a guest worked together could use a "loss" as a way of hiding assets. After teaming up to lose a million dollars, they would win back \$900,000 in cash.

The casino makes an easy \$100,000 without any work, then takes control of the \$900,000 the guest wants to hide. This is one process for someone shady to do away with assets, and that was why the Russian seat-filler lost so much money.

In other words, something was making the wealthy Russians want to part with their assets.

"Is that what those two want to know about?"

The old man's voice was calm, but he clearly didn't want to confirm or deny the information.

Yes, this is the moment. This is when it really feels like I'm gambling against the whole world.

"I don't know, but general trading companies will buy and sell anything. Information can make for a great commodity, you know."

The old man took a sip of his tea. It felt like an eternity before he opened his mouth again.

"Courage, bravery, good luck, and a talent for gambling. If you ever find yourself looking for a place to belong, then don't hesitate to come work for us. I'll treat you to some tasty food again."

That was how I came to learn the details of the ongoing Russian coup d'état.

I took out my cell phone and placed a call to Tokyo.

"Hello? President Toudou? I'm sorry to bother you. Is it night there already? I have some information I think you should know about... Yes. I can't talk about it on the phone, of course, so I'll head back there...after I go to Afghanistan first..."

Glossary and notes

Hong Kong underworld: The border between the normal community and the criminal society is very weak, so their coexistence, as opposed to a separation, is what makes them unique. This is the result of similar ideologies shared among the people of Hong Kong who escaped the control of communism after the Chinese Civil War. It's also a common meeting place for people from Guangdong, Shanghai, Taiwan, and other places. Hong Kong and Shanghai were also places to form connections with those from the Japanese mainland.

The opposition were winning before spring!

1: Anonymous: 01/07/29 20:01 ID: lunakeikain

A House of Councilors election when the Diet is done for.

Things are going to be crazy when they start counting votes!

(σ ° ∇ °)σ Excellent!!

2: Anonymous: 01/07/29 20:02 ID: ???

2nd. And I'm late.

3: Anonymous: 01/07/29 20:03 ID: ???

I thought the ruling and opposition parties were going to switch, but is the ruling party actually going to pull this off?

4: Anonymous: 01/07/29 20:04 ID: ???

The Koizumi sensation is incredible.

10: Anonymous: 01/07/29 20:14 ID: ???

>>1

The independents are all joining up with the ruling party.

In spring they were saying the opposition was sure to get a majority. How did this happen?

11: Anonymous: 01/07/29 20:15 ID:???

>>10

The Koizumi administration was a lot like the internal opposition in the Fellowship of Constitutional Government.

15: Anonymous: 01/07/29 20:17 ID: ???

If they're winning, then why does the secretary-general look like he ate something sour?

23: Anonymous: 01/07/29 20:34 ID: ???

Probably because he went around like an assistant professor in this election and all the orders were given by the Secretary-General of the House of Councilors and Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa.

The secretary-general's lined up to become the next prime minister, but he showed that he can't even do his job in the party. Isn't that probably why?

29: Anonymous: 01/07/29 20:47 ID: ???

>>23

But that "assistant professor" is why all the independents went to the Fellowship of Constitutional Government, so it's not like he's terrible. He's just in trouble if he goes for prime minister next.

30: Anonymous: 01/07/29 20:50 ID: ???

I'm starting to see the big picture now.

Watching the opposition get crushed after the support they had from independents is shocking.

If they'd gotten boots on the ground and gone door-to-door, this wouldn't have happened in the first place...

They should have figured it out when the prime minister was blatantly starting up aerial battles.

But I guess that's the opposition for you.

32: Anonymous: 01/07/29 21:01 ID: ???

The vote count has started for real now.

But the media is already out there making projections right off the bat.

Are the single-and double-seat electoral districts decided already?

33: Anonymous: 01/07/29 21:04 ID: lunakeikain

>>32

The reporters at the polling sites can probably see the size difference in stacks of votes between both parties.

The power of these independents is amazing...

34: Anonymous: 01/07/29 21:10 ID: ???

This thread's hilarious lmao.

35: Anonymous: 01/07/29 21:12 ID: ???

Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's got a victorious smile on his face, unlike

the sour look on the secretary-general.

The secretary-general of the House of Councilors is letting out a sigh of relief. This is a miracle considering how things looked in the spring.

36: Anonymous: 01/07/29 21:14 ID: lunakeikain

>>35

The House of Councilors used to be an independent monarchy.

Someone in the House of Councilors, the place where not even Prime Minister Koizumi has power, was arrested for corruption in the Foundation for the Development of Companies, and the terrible outlook for the spring election was what kickstarted the Koizumi regime.

The situation of the chief secretary is why Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa took over the party work, and I don't know where the money came from, but they sent independents to Karafuto, Tokyo, Chiba, and Kanagawa and got the votes from the right regions.

Then, after victory was assured, they joined the Fellowship of Constitutional Government and the Izumikawa faction. It makes me want to raise a toast to them.

40: Anonymous: 01/07/29 21:20 ID: ???

The opposing party's headquarters looks like a funeral...

48: Anonymous: 01/07/29 21:26 ID: ???

I'm sure they never thought their independents were all going to leave them.

68: Anonymous: 01/07/29 21:59 ID: ???

Still, we should see how hard they're working.

They're getting at least one win in a few districts and the proportional

representation is coming through.

69: Anonymous: 01/07/29 22:01 ID: ???

The Fellowship of Constitutional Government is winning so big, but they still can't get a supermajority?

70: Anonymous: 01/07/29 22:04 ID: lunakeikain

That's because of their big loss in the last election.

They serve six-year terms and hold elections in half the time, so they still can't make up for their last defeat.

That's what makes the House of Councilors so scary.

They have to win in the next election too if they want to make a full recovery. That's why the secretary-general is making that face.

It's hard to come back when you've lost it once already.

The regime change in the '90s was what led to the Madonna Boom and the huge wins for the left wing.

71: Anonymous: 01/07/29 22:07 ID: ???

>>70

And now the left wing getting less popular is a sign of the times.

I guess...the Showa era is just over?

72: Anonymous: 01/07/29 22:09 ID: ???

When you think about proportional representation, the opposition being so split really hurts them.

Won't they decide to join up again?

86: Anonymous: 01/07/29 22:33 ID: ???

>>72

Ha ha ha. No way.

Not after they split from all the fighting.

87: Anonymous: 01/07/29 22:37 ID: ???

Breaking news: Ruling party majority confirmed!!

88 Anonymous: 01/07/29 22:40 ID: ???

I can see how the locals have really gone home to the ruling party.

Maybe the Keika Shikoku Shinkansen really did make them fight to have it brought to their city.

Keika covers the bill and the government just has to give permission.

A Tohoku extension, Hokkaido, or Kyuushuu stop would get them fired up.

89 Anonymous: 01/07/29 22:42 ID: ???

But didn't the prime minister commit to dissolving zaibatsu?

Izumikawa's faction won big this time and they have deep ties to Keika, so I doubt he'd cut off the deputy prime minister now, since he's managing the party business.

90: Anonymous: 01/07/29 22:46 ID: lunakeikain

I won't deny that. Prime Minister Koizumi is scary because you don't know what he's capable of...

The House of Councilors election is over, opposition!

1. Anonymous: 01/08/01 22:46 ID: lunakeikain

Now let's enjoy our summer vacation!

(σ ° ∇ °)σ Excellent!!

Glossary and notes

The independents' storm: This came to a head during the Koizumi Boom. The election was a massacre. At the start of spring around Golden Week, the opposition party was still expected to win (based on the results of a pre-Golden Week survey before the Koizumi administration was formed), but over the next three months they fell like dominos. It was a total disaster. The LDP achieved an overwhelming victory aside from two single-seat districts at the time, Iwate and Mie.

Aerial battle: A mass media ad campaign centered around TV commercials. Door-to-door campaigns in electoral districts are often called "land wars." In the golden days of television, these aerial battles easily overtook the land wars.

The Madonna Boom: The huge victory won by female Diet members from the Japan Socialist Party under the leadership of Doi Takako during 1989's House of Councilors election. The LDP lost the majority in the House of Councilors and would end up breaking apart under the Miyazawa Cabinet.

Chapter 6:

Cassandra's Lament

C*LAP CLAP.* Two bows, two claps, and another bow. I was visiting a nearby shrine to offer a prayer after moving into my new home, Kudanshita Keika Tower. My first job in this new base was rather intense.

I had to memorize the building's layout.

"Hmm... So this is the second basement floor...?"

The second basement floor was connected to Kudanshita Subway Station, but it was also home to an underground parking lot, the main facilities, and a security office. The parking lot was the type where you took an elevator up to the surface and it was entirely sectioned off to provide the necessary security. The same facilities were also set up on the roof in case of a prolonged battle where one end of the building fell into enemy control. The rooftop security office was also a break room for reserve guards and maids.

"If anything were to happen, police officers from the station across the street would come here and rescue you. There's also a direct elevator down to the second basement floor, so that would be the optimal escape route."

I listened to Tachibana's explanation as we walked down the brand-new basement corridor. Since there was no signage on one particular iron door, no ordinary person would know that it was an entrance to the Kudanshita police station's basement facility.

"We've also purchased the Kudanshita Kyomei Bank across the street, and we plan to use it for company dormitories and employee lodging. Those will also be connected to the basement so reinforcements can be sent in that way."

He said it so casually. When she saw the look of shock on my face as I wondered what sort of battle they were expecting here, my secretary Angela explained the reasoning to me.

"We've prepared squadrons to fight back against anyone who tries to harm

you, my lady. The guards will take shifts to be sure there is a security team on duty at all times, and you will be constantly under the protection of a group of maids. Kudanshita also contains the Tokyo headquarters of Kitakaba Security, so a small army will be stationed here in the future.”

There was a reason for this. After the law was amended and we purchased KYOSHO Rapid Railway Co., we took charge of security for their train stations, and those workers used the east-west subway lines to get to work. Employees of Shin-Tokiwa Railway Company, which was currently under construction, would use the metropolitan Shinjuku line to get to work, get off at Iwamotochou Station, walk four hundred meters, and reach Akihabara. The plan was to use a redeveloped building as a separate facility once construction was complete.

“That’s overkill. The only people who’d come for me would be after a ransom, or they’d just be perverts.”

“Are those types of attacks not frightening enough by themselves?”

Angela was always serious about anything involving security. She never wavered.

That side of her was frustrating, but it was also logical, so I had no choice but to acknowledge its worth.

“Okay, okay. I’ll admit when I’m wrong.”

We entered the security office on the second basement floor and were greeted by simultaneous bows from the guards inside. I waved my hand at them.

“My name is Nakajima Atsushi, and I oversee security for this building. I’ll dedicate myself to ensuring your safety, my lady.”

I remembered this man as the commander of a spy ring for the former Northern Japanese government. Holding the rank of captain, he was an expert in counterterrorism and counter guerrilla activities.

“If I may be blunt, what would benefit us most is permission to carry

weapons.”

“I’ll have to ask that you follow this country’s laws. Is the corridor going to be a problem?”

Legal amendments now allowed people under the command of any police officer to fire police-entrusted handguns if they had permission to carry them. However, even if a ranking officer gave permission, the weapons were stored in the basement underneath the police station. The terrorists weren’t idiots, either.

“It seems like it will. If the unthinkable were to happen, we’d have to send people with weapons permits running down that hall. That will be a loss of five minutes at the very least, which is quite significant when responding to a situation.”

Those five minutes would mean putting my safety and the lives of others at risk, but arming oneself in a modern nation was the same as rejecting public safety. That fact was an unmistakable truth of this world and this country.

“That’s where this comes into play.”

I tapped on the armor leaning against the wall. It was a reinforced armored skeleton. In the past, it had been used for protecting the wearer from exhaustion in the bitter cold, shielding them from bomb blasts or shrapnel, and allowing them to operate heavy weapons. Those were the goals in mind when the armor had been developed by Northern Japan’s army. The Imperial Police would use it to suppress radical terrorist protests, but after the Second February 26 Incident, the Imperial Police were disbanded, and the armor was no longer used in Japan.

This technology was believed to have been lost to history after the fall of the Northern Japanese government, the last nation to use it, but the armor’s usefulness against biological and chemical weapons gained attention after the 1995 terrorist attacks by a new religious movement, and the JSDF and police counterterrorism teams started to adopt it again.

It also functioned as a simple form of a power-assisted suit due to its use of springs and electricity. Captain Nakajima had used the armor before in the special forces, and he said it would be highly effective as both a shield and a

weapon in urban combat.

“We foresee three potential scenarios for your escape, my lady. The safest method would be for you to take the direct elevator here to the second basement floor and escape underground. If we’re able to obtain weapons from the Kudanshita police station, we can almost guarantee your safe escape. There is one corridor we’ll have to pass through, but if we’re able to make it out, we can get you to the police station or the Kyomei Bank and wait for the terrorists to be overpowered.”

Captain Nakajima continued his explanation as he displayed a map of the building on his monitor.

“Another scenario is to have you escape by helicopter via the roof. We have a Hind on permanent standby at Tokyo Heliport, and it will be able to carry you off the roof within thirty minutes.”

Thirty minutes. Thirty minutes up against armed insurgents in a confined space. Apparently, my doubt about whether escape was possible was showing on my face.

“Please rest assured, my lady. We’re here to make sure everything goes according to plan.”

There once was a time when I believed such thoughts.

“A nuclear bomb?!”

“Yes. That was the information a general for the northern alliance got from their captive. ‘They’ve got a nuke,’ he said.”

The man, who had come all the way back home from overseas, revealed this shocking fact to me so plainly.

He was Okazaki Yuuichi, a resource management employee from Akamatsu Corporation.

The Moonlight Fund’s resource fund was a bit complicated in execution and functioned by borrowing the elites from the resource management department. To put it simply, Okazaki acted as my messenger and focused all

his efforts on buying more resources from the markets.

President Toudou Nagayoshi of Akamatsu Corporation hadn't hesitated to bet it all on me, and he was now suddenly the man of the hour due to his reorganization of the business. Of course, this was also to prevent Akamatsu Corporation from getting wrapped up in other affairs after I played it risky and bought the company.

The man he recommended to me was Okazaki Yuuichi. Although he was only in his late twenties, he was the person who unified the Moonlight Fund and Akamatsu Corporation.

"Is that information accurate?"

We were at the Tokyo base of the Moonlight Fund inside Kudanshita Keika Tower. My room was at the back of the dealing area, and of course it had already been swept for bugs. Okazaki had come all the way back to Tokyo to give us this information, and the people who heard the report were Tachibana and I, the CIA team of Angela and Eva, and Anisha and Kitagumo Ryouko, the former Eastern spies. I'd already given them permission to distribute this important intelligence through their connections.

This was simply too risky to keep to myself.

"An information dealer told me this in New York, and he said he heard it directly from a general in the northern alliance. I decided my lady needed to know that he seems to believe it's true, at the very least."

To select one candidate from the hundred elites who came from various departments, I'd divided a billion yen in cash up among them and sent them out to multiply it within a week. Okazaki was the one who came back with the most in the end. He couldn't hide his smile.

While everyone else was blowing their money on gambling or stock speculation, the brave Okazaki used the cash to purchase information and sell it off to me. That information was the tip that conservatives inside the Russian government were planning a coup d'état, and it goes without saying that I paid a large sum of money for it. Okazaki was just the kind of person to show up with this new development.

“The problem is that this terrorist threat of nuclear weapons may just be an attempt to manipulate markets.”

I agreed with Okazaki and found myself speaking up.

“So that’s why your contact was in New York? If they wanted to short a disrupted market, they would certainly go after Wall Street.”

I knew what was going to happen soon. I had already taken measures to prevent it. But if I had received this information before all that, I definitely would have thought it sounded like a ridiculous movie plot.

I decided to confirm it with the former intelligence agents from America and Russia.

“Angela, Anisha, do you believe this information to be entirely true?”

Their reactions to my simple question were a clear answer. They refused to look me in the eyes.

“I assume you’ll explain yourselves?”

Once I demanded an explanation a bit more forcefully, it was Anisha who sighed and spoke up. She kept a serious look on her face as she gave a troubling response.

“Nuclear disarmament negotiations after the Cold War resulted in Russia working to dispose of their nuclear bombs. Those are the official reports.”

Official reports. What a wonderful way of putting it. There was nothing quite as untrustworthy as official reports and statistics from socialist countries.

“As far as I know, there’s a discrepancy of two nuclear bombs between what was actually disposed of and what’s been documented. We still don’t know why.”

I was speechless to learn of the missing nukes. And then Kitagumo Ryouko, the former Northern Japanese spy, poured salt on the wound.

“When the Northern Japanese government collapsed, many scientists fled to Communist China. The result was a tremendous advance in nuclear technology throughout China. They also sent the same technology to Pakistan.”

In other words, China was the tech advisor for Pakistan's nuclear experiments, which were sponsored by oil-producing countries via Islamic extremists.

Islamic oil-producing countries wanted nukes in order to oppose Israel, which had continuously won in the Arab-Israeli Wars. They also wanted them for Iraq, which became their enemy during the Gulf War, and for Iran, their religious adversary.

"So they're planning to threaten us with a Pakistani nuke?"

"I'm not so sure about that. Pakistan almost launched nukes during the Kargil War, but pressure from international society put a stop to that. Unused nukes are probably nothing more than garbage to the Islamic extremists controlling Afghanistan," declared Kitagumo Ryouko.

Nuclear weapons held by nations were used as threats, but terrorist groups used them to get results. There was no reason to keep them around and not use them, which made the words of the general from the northern alliance sound even more grave.

"They have nukes. In other words, they must have a target they're planning to launch them at."

I'd gained a general understanding of the East's circumstances. When we moved on to talking about the West, it resulted in a stomachache for me.

"Nuclear weapons are managed appropriately by the United States and its allies. However, there have been a few unfortunate accidents..."

According to Angela, these unfortunate accidents included bomber planes crashing with hydrogen bombs onboard, resulting in the disappearance of the explosives. They knew of two such incidents as well as another where the bomb's trigger activated, releasing plutonium and turning it into a dirty bomb. These were tremendous missteps, and Angela told me that many higher-ups in the US military had been dismissed as a result.

It was a shock to learn that some of those bombs still hadn't been recovered.

"Is it possible that terrorist groups could find these weapons?"

“Most likely not. One plane crashed in the arctic region of Greenland. The Soviets wouldn’t have been able to get to it, much less a terrorist group without the technology or finances to retrieve it. We would find out if they did.”

Yet Angela’s voice remained very stern. Eva, the active CIA agent, explained why.

“We also searched for one of the nukes lost by the East, but Anisha mentioned that there were two. That means there’s one we didn’t know about.”

Eva’s face had lost all color. That much was understandable. She’d never expected there to be such a gap in their information, especially about the whereabouts of something like a nuclear bomb.

“Pardon me, Anisha. May I ask you for more details about this subject, to confirm for myself?”

I nodded after Eva’s question, indicating that Anisha could continue. The same went for Angela and Eva, but Anisha having access to such classified information was proof of her high ranking in her agency.

“It was a PT-23 that went missing, codenamed Scalpel by NATO. It was a railway-based missile system with one nuclear missile on board for each formation. The 1991 coup d’état saw rebelling military forces take control of the train with the missile on it, and the most extreme situation could have resulted in it being sent to Moscow. The train was deployed to the coast of the Black Sea during the coup d’état, and once that failed, we lost track of it after it reached Kazakhstan. I believe the United States already knows that the Kazakhstan government claims no knowledge of this train.”

Anisha fell silent, looked to Angela and Eva for confirmation, and saw them both nod. It was time to get to the heart of the nuclear matter.

“The problem is that the train was stationed on a base that was decommissioned during US-Soviet denuclearization negotiations. They also had another PT-23 train with a single missile in reserve. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the search of the base was postponed, and by the time the Russian army finally got there, it was already an empty husk.”

She took to the computer to display a certain location in Russia on the monitor. It was a narrow strip of land, with the Black Sea to the west and the Caspian Sea to the east, where turmoil continued to brew.

“The secret base was constructed underground at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains. Do you know what those mountains border?”

Anisha was smiling, but the same couldn’t be said for the rest of us. The label on the border clearly read “Chechen Republic.”

Okazaki Yuuichi’s report about the existence of the nukes reached American intelligence agencies and the rest of the world alongside them.

The biggest worry was that the missing nuclear missiles could fire multiple shots, with one shot containing as many as ten nuclear bombs. The rest of the world had assumed a missile would never come their way, but with twenty potential blasts, they could no longer assume that.

“Nuclear missiles are extremely precise equipment. It’s hard to believe that terrorists would be able to handle them.”

That was Angela’s stance. This was why many countries were racing to identify any potential targets for Islamic extremist terrorists. Anisha had left Tokyo to visit an old pal in Russia, which was probably code for getting in touch with Moscow intelligence agencies.

“Intelligence from many countries around the world has confirmed threats and signs of Islamic terrorism. I’ve selected the locations that appear to be the most likely targets.”

Angela handed me a sheet of paper. There were over twenty cities listed on it.

“New York, London, Tokyo. Is the threat simply the destruction of any major city?”

“Exactly. The world is guarding these cities since they’re major points of distribution.”

I frowned at the news. The terrorists had still devised a plan that I’d never predicted. We couldn’t underestimate them.

“Denver? Where’s that again?”

“The state of Colorado. There are also threats of terrorism in Baltimore, Maryland.”

My face remained solemn. The attacks I was familiar with involved crashing planes into buildings, but intelligence agencies throughout the world had completely shifted focus to the threat of nuclear terrorism.

Simply taking shelter from a nuclear attack would bring a city to a halt, so the default move for the targeted countries was to deny threats while working behind the scenes to prevent them. Well, it wasn’t as if they could tell the whole world that there were twenty potential nuclear bombs missing and some of them had fallen into the hands of terrorists.

“Protections for these countries aside, about the counterterrorism measures here in Tokyo...”

Angela misread my concern as fear for the city’s safety. She smiled to reassure me.

No, it’s not that. But telling her wouldn’t change anything.

“Governor Iwasawa is taking charge of the measures and making a large-scale security upgrade. The government is going along with the plan and launching investigations. I’m sure we’ll hear about the results soon.”

This country suffered many natural disasters. It would be inappropriate to say I was “grateful” for this, but September 1st was our designated Disaster Preparedness Day. Because of that, not only were the JSDF, police, and local governments trained for large-scale disaster responses, but recently amended laws allowed security guards, detectives, and even bounty hunters to join them.

These incredibly large operations received criticism from some members of the opposition party who said they were a waste of government funds, but Governor Iwasawa and Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa managed to force them through in the end. Of course, they did this due to the information about the nuclear threat I leaked to them.

The victory of the ruling coalition party during July’s House of Councilors election also contributed to this. They achieved a majority and managed to get

additional approval from unaffiliated conservatives in Karafuto, Tokyo, Chiba, and Kanagawa, also herding them into the Izumikawa faction and providing funds to that end. It was a major solidification of Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa's position.

"The laws got revised at the perfect time. Now we can attack any terrorists."

The police were generally a passive organization that responded after a crime occurred. The flaw was that they couldn't work unless there was already a crime, which made it difficult to handle offenses such as stalking. This had been a common criticism in recent years.

In response to this, clients were now allowed to pay security guards, detectives, and bounty hunters to take active roles. I personally used the Moonlight Fund's money to hire members of all three groups for different jobs.

I offered the bounty hunters money to work against radical Islamic terrorist groups as proxies for the US government. I paid detectives to investigate anyone suspicious. But it was hard to do detective work in this day and age without connections to hackers, whom I also employed to investigate leads on the internet. The presence of security guards alone was a deterrent to crime, so I had them patrol city centers and coastlines to reinforce defenses in those areas.

However, all these jobs needed someone to supervise them. That was why I stopped Okazaki Yuuichi from returning to his gambling den and ordered him to keep track of information relating to the counterterrorism efforts.

Angela would normally be suited for this role, but she hadn't completely separated herself from the United States yet. That was one reason why I had to keep Okazaki Yuuichi close at hand.

"Can I have a minute, my lady?"

"What is it?"

"It seems that we've intercepted communication from a terrorist organization. Please refer to the information from the United States."

I liked that Okazaki spoke to me like an older cousin while still maintaining respect. It was always a pleasant interaction, and his way of striking a balance in

our conversations was hard to surpass. He handed the papers over to Eva, who left her post and exited the room. Okazaki then sat down in a chair, stared up at the ceiling, and sighed.

“To be honest, I didn’t think there would be so much of this. It’s not just the nuclear terrorism. There’re also plenty of distractions and pranks out there, so it’s really hard to tell what’s real.”

Couldn’t the nukes themselves be a distraction? The memories from my past life were whispering this suggestion in my ear, but if the unthinkable happened and the bombs went off, the number of casualties could be many hundreds of times higher than in my other life. This was why it was so stressful to be unable to pin down the terrorists’ targets.

“Do you think terrorists will detonate any nukes?”

“I would say it’s fifty-fifty, but we’ve found various terrorists attempting distractions already. It’s almost guaranteed we’ll see something carried out.”

Okazaki shifted his gaze from the ceiling to the window. Visible through the bulletproof glass was the distant Imperial Palace, shrouded in nature.

“If they do try to launch nukes, the issue is how they’d carry the bombs to their target. This is just my own theory, but I don’t think there’re any nukes in Afghanistan. If they brought them in from the Caucasus, there are only three routes to get them there.”

Okazaki picked up the remote from the table and turned on a large monitor that displayed a map.

He seemed sluggish, but I could tell that his eyes and hands were wide awake.

“The first way is to carry them on a ship through the Black Sea. Let’s set aside the issue of how they’d hide the nukes and think about the easy targets, which would be New York or London. They could reach those cities by ship.”

He paused there before continuing.

“The problem would be whether or not they could cross the Bosphorus Strait. Turkey is a member of NATO and they’re not dumb about this sort of thing. They’re also dealing with the Kurdish conflict, so giving any help to anti-

government organizations could interfere with their efforts to handle that.”

When they suppressed the Kurds within their country, they helped Islamic terrorists outside of it.

As I remembered it, this paradox was causing trouble both inside and outside of Turkey.

“The next option is to go south of the Caucasus and take it through Turkey or Iraq. This would be a dangerous plan too. Both countries have groups of anti-government insurgents going up against their militaries. You can’t get a nuke through a situation like that.”

Then Okazaki declared his own personal conclusion. I decided to ignore the smile I saw forming on his face.

“If I were a terrorist who got my hands on a nuke, I would keep it hidden instead of using it. That’s my honest suspicion. The Chechens are in a fierce battle against Russia, but they haven’t used that nuke for themselves. They could have accomplished their goal just by making it into a dirty bomb and contaminating a major city. Does the nuke even exist in the first place?”

Angela was about to speak up in response to Okazaki’s dangerous theory, but I stopped her. He seemed to be saying Anisha had given us false information. Realizing how it sounded, Okazaki rushed to correct himself.

“It’s not that Anisha-san wasn’t truthful. She’s a high-ranking agent and would be in position to receive those reports, which must have been exactly what happened.”

I understood what he was implying. There was nothing as untrustworthy as a report from a socialist country. In other words, if we couldn’t gather proof of her evidence, it wasn’t something we should stake everything on.

But that left another obvious question.

“You said you were fifty-fifty. What makes you feel that way?”

He took out a book from his bag in response to my question. It appeared to be something he’d bought from a used bookstore.

The title was *How to Make a Nuclear Weapon*.

“I think this is the real explanation. The more science has advanced, the more widespread information about the creation of nuclear bombs has become. This country has the administrative region of the former Northern Japanese government, a history of creating nuclear weapons, and production facilities that haven’t yet been fully scrapped. If you could get your hands on nuclear waste there, you could easily make a dirty bomb capable of plunging Tokyo into chaos.”

“My lady, I’ll be back shortly.”

With that brief statement, the former Northern Japanese spy, Kitagumo Ryouko, exited the room calmly but quickly. I knew she must have been rushing to confirm this information. I understood now. That was why my face paled as I looked at the map on the wall.

“You need precision instruments to build a detonator. Do you know where they can be purchased cheaply and in large quantities?”

I followed his gaze to the Tokyo railway map. My eyes landed on the terminal station that Keika Railway was constructing.

The name of town of electronics connected to that train station, later to become an otaku haven, was Akihabara.

While secret struggles against the threat of nuclear terrorism continued throughout the globe, the world itself was unaffected and remained perfectly peaceful.

That summer, movie theaters were packed with fans of the master anime director to see his newest film. Couples swarmed to the new amusement park that had opened in Tokyo Bay. Everything was calm—so calm, it was hard to comprehend that such peace could be broken.

“That was a good movie.”

“You think so? I thought that way of editing was kind of a waste. I thought the one on TV was better.”

“Still, it was a real passion project. It featured folklore, legends, and customs

too. I've read some commentaries and I'm still impressed they managed to include so much and have it come out good."

"Hm? What's wrong, Runa?"

"Ah, I'm sorry. A bunch of upsetting things have come up, but I can't talk about them."

It was my first opportunity to relax in a while. I spent my day off with the Quartet seeing a movie, and once we got to Avanti, I smiled awkwardly as I sipped my grape juice and listened to them comment on my demeanor as we chatted.

They all knew I was struggling with things this summer, and they all looked so worried about me.

"Are you okay, Runa? I'll help you if there's anything you need."

"I appreciate the thought, but it's just an issue on the national political level."

As a reminder, the four of us were elementary schoolers. It was already strange for us to be discussing national political issues, but this was something even more top secret than that. Yuujirou-kun was involved in this topic too, but of course, he didn't know exactly what Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa was so busy with.

"It must be tied to the month-long disaster preparedness for the city—my father has been running around handling it. I'm sure you're involved too, aren't you, Keikain-san?"

"That's not a bad guess. There's just a lot I can't say. But my security company is going to be involved too."

"Ah, you have my condolences."

Mitsuya-kun gave a nod of understanding. The disaster preparedness plan involved the largest mass mobilization in history. The Ministry of Finance had been wailing over the scale and budget of the entire thing.

The First Division of the Eastern army and the Imperial Guard Division had both been ordered to take part, and the Metropolitan Police were sending out even more riot squads than during the 1995 attacks by the new religious

movement.

On top of that, the amended laws allowed for security guards to work as subcontractors under the police, so all major domestic security firms were ordered to send personnel to Tokyo to participate in the training under the guise of testing police-and-security cooperation.

“Our security company is from Hokkaido, but they were forced to come out here. They don’t have any place to stay, so they’re using a newly completed ferry in the bay as a base. I hope the Kudanshita building will be ready for full operation soon.”

The Kudanshita building actually *was* already at full operation, but this case required all forces in Hokkaido to be sent here to protect against nuclear terrorism. The *Diamond Actress*, a boat previously set to be completed in the fall, just happened to be ready in time, or perhaps was forced to be ready in time. It was stationed in Tokyo Bay, where it was serving as a very effective temporary base.

The Kudanshita building was a medium-sized base, while the *Diamond Actress* became the home to three squadrons of mechanized foot soldiers. Together, their residents could form a large army in the city.

Between the JSDF, police, firefighters, and other security firms, there were over a hundred thousand personnel in total. This was why the opposition party raised a fuss that these measures made it seem like wartime or martial law.

But this criticism didn’t garner much attention because Japan was a hegemony country in this world, participating in a war and spilling blood on foreign soil.

“Ah, that’s right. You reminded me. Here you go!”

I deliberately changed the subject and pulled three invitations out of my bag. I handed them to the boys.

I had already told them the schedule in advance, and though their families had given permission, it was still important to handle sentimental matters like this.

“They’re invitations to the party for the completion of Kudanshita Keika

Tower. I wrote them myself.”

“Thank you.”

Eiichi-kun was the first to accept the invitation, and the others followed suit after he thanked me. We continued to chat until this normal, peaceful day came to an end. Police officers and security guards were stationed on all the roads in the name of disaster training, keeping a close eye on us.

“My lady, I have good news, bad news, and very bad news. Which would you like to hear first?”

“Can I pass on all of them?”

Once I got into my limousine, my brain switched back to counterterrorism mode. Angela ignored my comment and started with the good news.

“I’ll start with something good. A Russian citizen was arrested after buying precision instruments for bomb-making in the city. He was a refugee who escaped to the former Northern Japan during the collapse of the Soviet Union. He has a history of anti-government activities and became a follower of Islamic extremists. The city will remain on guard until the end of the month as planned, and the authorities are looking into his co-conspirators to get a clearer picture.”

I let out a sigh of relief. At the very least, it sounded like we would be able to prevent any attention-getting terrorism within Tokyo.

The hackers were doing research, detectives were out on the ground, and security guards were reinforcing the defenses of nuclear power plants and nuclear disposal facilities. The result was a delay in this criminal’s ability to obtain nuclear waste, which led to him being caught.

“It sounds like this attack has been prevented. So what’s the bad and very bad news?”

“We’ve received word from Anisha in Moscow that there were fewer missing nuclear warheads than first believed. Instead of multi-warheads, there were two 500-kiloton nuclear warheads left at the secret base as reserves. It sounds as if this information is confirmed.”

Okazaki’s prediction was incorrect. There really *were* missiles. It seemed that

the initial information wasn't to be trusted after all. Unreliable reports were common in socialist countries, but I was curious why Angela was calling this bad news.

"That doesn't sound like bad news to me. The potential twenty strikes is now down to two. How is that not good news?"

"The problem is the location of the nuclear warheads. It's true that the operators of the missile-bearing trains fled to Kazakhstan, but the warheads had already been sold off to fund their escape. The buyers were the former Romanian secret police."

Ah, that's bad news indeed.

The Romanian secret police was composed of carefully selected, highly trained orphans, known and feared as the "children" of the Romanian president at the time. They supported him during the revolution, after which the organization was dissolved and suppressed. The rumored result was that many of the former secret police officers turned to organized crime.

The Balkans were also a major route for human trafficking, weapons deals, and drug sales through the European black market. If a nuclear warhead disappeared in Romania, chances were high that the black market was where it ended up.

"Reports state that the nuclear warhead was sent to Romania through the Black Sea and taken along the land route in Hamburg with the help of a secret police officer disguised as a Romani. After that, it disappeared somewhere along a sea route."

From Romania to Hungary, then Czechoslovakia to Germany. Those were the land routes the missile traveled. Naturally, I had never predicted such a trip. Besides, the fact that the policeman was disguised as a Romani person meant that he'd gone and hidden somewhere in the murky darkness of Europe.

Europe had a history of oppressing those wandering people, but despite this persecution, the government had little ability to strongly affect their community. We'd cast our net over Turkey and the Black Sea, but we were completely outsmarted.

“The missile’s appearance on the black market was never leaked to us?”

“That relates to the very bad news. The coup d’état forces during the Soviet Union had sponsors who wanted to use the Soviet Union’s conservatives and the former Romanian secret police to obtain a nuclear bomb. We believe that the warhead ended up with them.”

Angela revealed the sponsors to me. When I heard the names, they made some sense to me.

“They were Libya and Iraq.”

Ah, so that’s what the foreshadowing was about. As someone who knew how international politics would develop, it was all becoming clear to me.

“The United States is already preparing a complaint to the IAEA. The intelligence community believes those two countries became the sponsors, incited terrorist organizations, and have been attempting to commit terrorist attacks. Their failed dirty bomb attack in Tokyo was likely a distraction, and the true targets are the United States and Europe...”

A shockwave hit my body just then. We managed to stop...the nuclear terrorism. The result was that everyone had shifted into defense mode against a nuclear attack, leaving us unprotected from the terrorists in other ways.

“I imagine there are more diversions on the way. What should we do?”

Mentioning hijacked planes wouldn’t do any good here. There was an even greater risk right before our eyes. Angela, the former CIA agent, gave me one definitive remark to reassure me.

“That’s definitely possible, and we’ll take all precautions. However, if a nuclear weapon or dirty bomb were to detonate, it’s impossible to predict the resulting damage. We have to think of these diversion attacks as *collateral damage*.”

I knew where that could lead. All I could do was pray that nothing would come of it.

To many, it was a perfectly ordinary day. Nobody expected it to be the day

that would change the world forever.

...Nobody but me.

September 11th, 2001.

The Japanese people found the presence of extra policemen and guards to be strange, but they spent their day normally, entertained by lighthearted news stories about celebrities and killing time with small talk about delicious desserts.

They carried out their normal work at their normal companies. Students were thinking about their future jobs now that the economic future was looking brighter, or they were studying for winter exams. Whether it involved love, games, or schoolwork, their days were always the same. They repeated this cycle tirelessly, over and over again, believing it would continue unchanged forever.

Housewives finished up their chores and laundry by the afternoon and left to go shopping for the evening's dinner. Children came home from school and played video games.

Everything was perfectly normal. Nobody noticed that the world was on the verge of changing. Nobody wished for such a day.

"What do the surrounding defenses look like?"

"The bodyguard department has ordered guards to station themselves throughout the city. Multiple routes from the prime minister's residence to Kudanshita have been secured."

"A typhoon is on its way, so defenses around the metropolitan area have been increased. We're moving out personnel under the pretext of disaster relief, so be sure to minimize the damages."

"Has anything suspicious been found on the internet?"

"Nothing that points to terrorism in or near Japan."

"I tried using my connections, but no one else could find any information either."

As for the case of the Russian who'd tried to detonate a dirty bomb in the city, he'd received his instructions over the internet from foreign addresses, which was complicating the entire investigation.

Still, the failed terrorist attack resulted in the announcement that the man had been arrested for creating explosive materials, which the international media paid little attention to.

The reporters focused instead on that night's opening party for the Kudanshita Keika Tower. They only speculated on things like whether Prime Minister Koizumi would attend as a guest, being the man of the hour, and what songs I would sing.

"A general for the northern alliance was attacked by terrorists?! Is that true?!"

I burst into the trading room in the Moonlight Fund's Tokyo headquarters, having abandoned preparations for the party. Okazaki, who had obtained that information, gave me the report.

"Rest assured that the general made it out safely after we warned him and sent out protection. The attack was likely retaliation for the increased vigilance throughout the world. When you consider who leaked the information about nuclear terrorism, the general was their prime target as the closest man in proximity."

Okazaki paused there. The look on his face had turned entirely sour. He was probably frustrated that he couldn't be there to help the general, seeing as how the situation was such a close call.

"However, the terrorist attack in question was a suicide bombing. I would like to look further into that, but the world's intelligence agencies are currently in a panic over the threat of nuclear attacks. In all honesty, Tokyo may be safe with its month-long mobilization, but the West sees it as a 24-hour constant overtime shift that gets in the way of other business."

Their traps were gradually being exposed. Still, I didn't understand the whole story behind them yet. At the very least, there had been no nuclear attacks in the world I knew about from my past life.

“Please keep in touch with that general no matter what it takes. He’s going to become a valuable person.”

“Very well. May I have a moment of your time, my lady?”

He looked at me with a serious expression on his face. For the first time in a while, I nodded to Tachibana and invited Okazaki into my office.

“If I may be blunt, I believe you predicted an outcome like this.”

I stopped Tachibana before he could interrupt. I had a feeling someone would notice how perfect all my actions had been. Still, I tried playing dumb anyway.

“What makes you think that?”

“Your methods are too precise. Also, despite the threat of attacks, you’ve made no attempt to manage your assets. You’re acting to prevent terrorism under the assumption that there will be losses. In order to accept the conclusion I drew from this, I had to rely on the help of alcohol.”

I kept a smile on my face but glared at Okazaki. The truth of what he was saying reminded me that I could struggle and struggle, yet my own hands remained too small to achieve what I wanted.

“My lady, are you really just an elementary schooler? You’ve noticed that the true nature of this terrorism is theatrics, and that it’s merely a means to a next step rather than the final goal. But instead of adjusting your assets, you’ve made it so that intelligence agencies throughout the world can’t doubt you. If the markets were to crash over terrorist attacks now, you would at the very least be eliminated from suspicion.”

“...I first predicted terrorism after humanitarian aid was sent to help with the Gujarat Earthquake. If I said that I became certain after Afghan extremists destroyed the Buddha statues in Bamiyan, would you believe me?”

“Let’s go with that story, then. I don’t believe in the supernatural. However, don’t forget that the currently flustered United States has agencies that research the paranormal, and not just on TV shows.”

I would have felt better if he had just openly threatened me. At the very least, he seemed to have chosen to stay on my side. It meant that this was a contract

negotiation between the two of us.

“So, when did you start to doubt me?”

“From the very beginning.”

With that, Okazaki removed a carefully folded check from his breast pocket. It was the check I’d given him in return for the information he brought me, but the sum was still left blank. It looked like he used it as a good luck charm.

“I gave you that because the information was so valuable.”

“That’s not it, my lady. By giving me this check, you bet it all on the Russian president, and that one decision casts shadows in the opposite direction. That’s what this is. It just takes a bit of suspicion and research to find all sorts of things. My lady, it’s hard to believe that you would risk everything during such a critical time. The same goes for the recent House of Councilors election.”

Okazaki returned the check to his pocket and placed a piece of candy in his mouth.

He was supposedly restraining himself from smoking cigarettes in rooms where I would be, as I hated the smell.

“Wasn’t that only natural, based on Prime Minister Koizumi’s high approval ratings?”

“Yes, and that much was fine. But Tokyo, Kanagawa, Chiba, and Karafuto were all won with proportional representation too. On top of that, the chief secretary couldn’t control the election, so the power became concentrated between the vice president and deputy prime minister. The chief secretary, the famous ‘independent king’ of the Fellowship of Constitutional Government, owed a debt in the end. Once his honor was ruined after the major victory, he was beholden to the vice president and deputy prime minister, forcing him to approve the extensive disaster preparedness training. No elementary school student could have foresight like that.”

“How rude.”

I acted like I was upset, but this actually was the one thing I’d gone all out for. It was because I knew what day it was today. I’d used all the power at my

disposal, but it wasn't enough.

All I could do now was pray.

"So, what exactly should I do for you in return?" I asked. "Do you want to run Akamatsu Corporation? Or be made a billionaire? I could even prepare a bouquet of beautiful girls, excluding myself. I can get you almost anything you desire."

"Hearing a grade-schooler say that is so surreal, it makes me feel like I'm on the verge of some sort of awakening. But I don't want any of those things."

Okazaki gave me a big grin that seemed to express his true nature.

"My lady, let me have a front row seat to see how you change history. I promise to pay for that ticket by working as your eyes and ears."

"Tachibana, do you think we can use him?"

"If we don't, we won't have enough pawns at our disposal."

"My lady, Tachibana-san, that's a cruel way of putting it."

Okazaki smiled, but all I could do was sigh. He seemed to be a man who valued his own interests and enjoyment over loyalty to an organization.

He was a lone wolf who was easy to read, but I had no one else to rely on. Tachibana and Ichijou were the only people whose loyalty I believed in, so I couldn't let Okazaki go now.

"Very well, then. I'll be working you hard, so be prepared for what comes next."

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

Just as Okazaki was bowing to me, his and Tachibana's phones rang at the same time. It was an emergency call from the trading room.

I nodded, led the two of them back there, and learned that an urgent phone call had come in from America.

Angela, who had remained there, grew paler and paler as she reported to us.

"The United States has learned that a freight train transporting nuclear waste was hijacked in Colorado and is now heading for Denver. The FBI, National

Guard, and military are currently trying to take control of the situation.”

In that moment, the curtain rose on the stage of a changed world.

The completion party for Kudanshita Keika Tower was set to begin a bit later in the evening, at 9:00 p.m. This meant that guests would arrive about thirty minutes early to chat and drink with everyone else. The other reason for the starting time was so that important figures from the political and business worlds could provide information right away in case anything bad happened.

“It sounds as though the culprit behind the Colorado hijacking was shot and killed, ending the threat. The train almost kept going on its own, but they managed to derail it and minimize the damage that way. The United States government remains on high alert.”

My face remained stiff as I listened to Angela’s report. I hated that this incident had taken place in Colorado. Since that state was in the Midwest, it meant that the US wasn’t going to be focused on protecting their East Coast cities.

“I heard there was a buildup of radioactive waste. What sort of damage is that causing?”

“I don’t have any reports about that yet.”

Angela’s tone sounded serious, but she couldn’t hide the relief she was feeling. The train derailing and releasing hazardous waste wasn’t on the same scale as Denver being destroyed, so she probably saw this as nothing more than collateral damage.

“Anyway, my lady, did you memorize your notes for tonight’s party greetings?”

“That’s such a pain. Can’t I just make them up as I go?”

“No, you can’t. Prime Minister Koizumi, Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, and many important politicians will be in attendance tonight. As a young lady, I’m sure you understand that greetings are political, isn’t that right?”

“Right...”

I reluctantly began to memorize my script. It was at times like this that I was glad to have my body with its cheats.

“In return, you’ll get to listen to a session featuring Watabe-san and the Teia International Philharmonic.”

“Ah, so Watabe-san agreed to perform!”

Watabe-san was my driver in addition to being a violinist, and despite his protests that he still found it embarrassing, it sounded like the Teia Philharmonic had been so eager that they got him to fold. He still performed on his own and, because he drew such big audiences, Teisei Department Stores had even given him a performance hall to use.

“The typhoon has calmed significantly as well.”

“Indeed. I bet the skies will be clear by tonight.”

From the bottom of my heart, I wished for the party to end without incident.

“Hey, Runa. We’re here.”

“Congratulations on finishing the building. It’s really impressive.”

“It’s like the peak of the Keikain family’s glory.”

The usual group came to congratulate me. It was now 6 p.m.

The mood before the party was relaxed. Only relatives and close friends of the Keikain family were invited into this room, where a light dinner was available.

“My building’s great, isn’t it? I feel like I’m the queen of a castle.”

“People usually talk about their houses like that. It’s just like you to say that about a skyscraper, Runa.”

“Normally the market would make you need a long-term loan for something like this, but you bought the whole thing all at once. That’s your style, Keikain-san.”

“Keikain’s so impressive. She’s the only one who could boast about something like that.”

As we snacked on sandwiches and drinks, Kaoru-san arrived with her older

sister.

This event was also going to feature the announcement of Sakurako-san and Nakamaro-oniisama's engagement. Their family relationships had gone through many twists and turns to finally reach the point where it could be publicized like this, and that was my fault more than anyone else's.

"Runa-san, let me introduce you to Sakurako, my sister."

"Good evening. I'm Sakurako, the eldest daughter of the Asagiri Marquessate. I am much indebted to Nakamaro-san for his care."

"I am Runa of the Keikain Dukedom. Please look after Nakamaro-oniisama."

"Hey, now. Are you sure I can't look after myself?"

Nakamaro-oniisama joined our conversation. The Keikain family members were worried that I might use my assets and connections to set myself up independently outside of the family, so they were working to keep me in check. That was why his engagement had been in danger of cancellation for some time.

The fact that they could publicly announce it like this now was surely thanks to Nakamaro-oniisama and Sakurako-san's hard work.

"I currently work at the counter at Iwazaki Bank. I'm quite good at counting bills!"

"Onesama got engaged right as she graduated from college, so she had to go crying to Grandfather because she never prepared for her post-college life."

"I'm truly sorry." Nakamaro-oniisama and I said in unison, bowing our heads at Kaoru-san's revelation. The Keikain family succession dispute was a proxy war fought over my acquisitions and business rivalries for the rapidly expanding Keika Group. The reaching of a compromise and the completion of the castle I now ruled over both happened with the help of Nakamaro-oniisama. It was a big deal that the Keikain family's regulations were going in a more positive direction.

Furthermore, the grandfather Sakurako-san had cried to was Iwazaki Yashirou-shi, the president of Iwazaki Bank.

“It’s time to move on to the party, everyone.”

Tachibana’s announcement prompted us to head to the upper floors. Maids were stationed at critical points in the hallways, and they bowed as we passed. When we reached the party venue, the important guests were already walking around with glasses in their hands as they chatted amongst themselves. I spotted the fathers of Eiichi-kun, Yuujirou-kun, and Mitsuya-kun in the room.

A group of celebrities were gathered around Prime Minister Koizumi, hoping to speak with him. I heard that Kiyomaro-tousama was also there to watch my big moment from the shadows. I darkly joked to myself that a plane hitting the building right now would mean the end of this country.

Nothing was going to happen here. I was confident in that much.

“The opening remarks will be delivered by Keikain Runa of the Keikain Dukedom...”

A spotlight illuminated me. I had always longed to stand in this light in my past life, but now it was like the harsh rays of judgment. Still, I forced a smile and stepped forward to greet the moment.

Please. Please don’t let anything happen.

I’m the only one who knows what’s going to happen.

I am, aren’t I?

In the end, my wish did not come true, and my prediction turned out to be correct.

“Everyone, I’m turning on the TV! Something’s happened in New York!” Okazaki opened the door and called out to us. We all turned to look at the monitor.

It was showing the Twin Towers in New York. One of them had gone up in smoke.

“What the hell?!”

“That’s not a movie, is it?!”

“This can’t be real...”

At first, I thought it did look like an impressive scene from a movie. Movies about terrorism were popular in Hollywood at the moment, but CGI wasn’t developed enough to look like this in reality... I still remembered how those thoughts had run through my head in my past life.

“They’re saying ten other planes have been hijacked too...”

I couldn’t stop staring at the TV and listening to the sound of the newscaster’s voice. I couldn’t prevent it. I had the means and I tried to enact the best possible plan, but I failed. What was I even living for now?

The second plane collided. I heard something snap inside of me.

“Runa!”

I watched as Eiichi-kun ran toward me. If he was running, then who was the one supporting me after my legs gave out?

“Please rest well, and thank you for what you’ve done. What comes next is a job for adults.”

When I looked up at the gentle smile on Prime Minister Koizumi’s face before I lost consciousness, I remember thinking that he was someone I could count on to handle things now.

September 12th.

I woke up again the next afternoon. The world had already been changing while I was asleep. The first reports had said that a total of ten planes were hijacked. Two of them hit the Twin Towers, while another two crashed into their targets: the Pentagon and the White House. Black smoke billowed out of both buildings. As fear spread for the safety of American government officials

and the president in particular, the news came that they had fortunately managed to escape harm.

The president had been vacationing during the first terrorist incident, so he had boarded Air Force One to return and was still en route when the attacks occurred. He continued to give orders from the plane. The problem of the other six planes remained until it was revealed that this was false information originating from the chaos of the situation. Everyone was relieved, but an investigation was also reportedly underway into how such a report came to be.

The train-jacking in Denver was said to be related to these attacks, and the US media was apparently in a major panic over the threat of nuclear terrorism on their soil. But the worst news came that evening.

Regarding the two nuclear warheads that were being tracked from their origin in the former Soviet Union, it was reported that ten years earlier an Israeli intelligence agency had raided a ship carrying a nuclear warhead at sea and stole the nuke for themselves. They were required to report this situation to the United States, but once a two-term Democratic president took over for a Republican in 1992, then was replaced by another Republican, the change in regimes led to disorder and the people involved with the nuke disappeared from center stage. The reports disappeared in classified documents, and the Israeli intelligence agency was unable to report on the clear act of piracy again. When the United States learned of this, they were furious.

There was already news of Islamic extremists claiming responsibility for the attacks, but those same organizations would see the claims and deny them. It was proof of the chaos the world was being plunged into.

As for Japan, it was announced that the case of the attempted bombing in Akihabara was related to this terrorism and that the culprit's goal was to make a dirty bomb with nuclear waste. When we sent our condolences to the United States, we also declared that we wouldn't tolerate any acts of terrorism and would fight alongside them. Just like Great Britain, we stood firmly with America. The whole world was practically enveloped in chaos and wartime distress.

"How are you feeling, my lady?"

I stared out at the Tokyo skyline from my bed. I was in my room on the top floor of Kudanshita Keika Tower. Airspace over the city had been completely closed off to prevent any hijackings, causing chaos for supply chains and transportation.

But the stock market was experiencing even more chaos. The Tokyo and London markets were in freefall.

“I’m all right. Physically, at least.”

I couldn’t stop it. I tried, but it was out of my reach. A fourth plane even ended up hitting the White House... What exactly did I do?

“I’m going to sleep a little longer.”

“Very well. I would suggest you eat something once you awaken. I’ve also arranged a counselor for you to speak with.”

I lay back in bed, listening to the sound of Tachibana’s voice. Then I drifted off to sleep.

“Big Brother! How could you die and leave me here like this?! Who am I supposed to rely on if I don’t have you?!”

Ah, I’m dreaming. Nakamaro-oniisama is still alive, after all.

“This is the end of the Keikain family. The internal structure has completely collapsed with the passing of Nakamaro-sama. Kiyomaro-sama has aged significantly too.”

“The Keika Group we once knew is a thing of the past. It will be dissolved, either by its many companies going bankrupt or by being absorbed by another organization as a bailout. Only Keika Pharmaceutical remains, but its leadership was handed over to Iwazaki Chemical during the merger, so all they have left is their dukedom now.”

“What good will a title do them at this point? They’ve already been forced out of noble society. They’ll probably crumble until they’re forgotten.”

A flood of curious—no, blatantly belittling—stares befell me at the funeral.

I had no strength left, nor anyone to rely on. All I had was my own body.

“Father-in-law, brother, I’ll prove it to you! I promise I won’t let the Keikain family collapse, even if I have to sell my soul to the devil...”

No! Don’t take their hand! That devil will lead you to your ruin in the end!

But my dream self couldn’t hear my cries. She simply sunk away into the abyss.

“NOOOO!”

I opened my eyes mid-scream. The hands of my clock told me that it was the middle of the night, and when I opened my curtains, the ever-beautiful skyline of Tokyo lit up the darkness. This reminder of normalcy made me feel happy, but when I saw the police officer, security guard, and JSDF member stationed at the intersection, I had to remember that “normalcy” had changed forever.

“My lady? Are you all right?”

I heard Tachibana’s voice through the door and took a quick, deep breath to calm my heart.

“I had a nightmare. I’m fine now, but I’d like to see a counselor tomorrow, so I’ll be staying home from school.”

“Of course. Do you require a drink? I can prepare you a cup of hot milk at once.”

“Yes, please. Can you also bring me something to eat? I’m hungry.”

“I will return with sandwiches as well.”

I suddenly thought of my dream again, so I asked Tachibana a question. *Yes, please convince me that it was just a dream.*

“Tachibana, where are Nakamaro-oniisama and Kiyomaro-tousama? I embarrassed myself in front of them yesterday.”

“They both remained in the building at first, but the situation eventually called for them to leave. Kiyomaro-sama went to the Privy Council, while Nakamaro-sama is at the Keika Holdings headquarters in Kayabacho, confirming the safety of all New York employees.”

I let out a sigh of relief at Tachibana’s report.

“I’ll be on my way, then. Please press the call button if you need anything at all from me.”

Tachibana’s voice grew distant. I lay back down in bed again.

When I turned on the light and started up my computer, I saw the fear spreading through the world as information about the terrorist attacks came out.

“I’ve brought you sandwiches, my lady.”

Hm? I opened the door, confused by the voice that clearly wasn’t Tachibana’s. Instead, it was his granddaughter—Yuka-san, if I was remembering correctly.

“Oh, you’re Tachibana’s granddaughter...”

“That’s right. My name is Yuka. Grandfather asked me to bring you these sandwiches. He’s in the Moonlight Fund’s trading room right now.”

I see. Tachibana must be very busy during this whole crisis too. It’s probably hard for him to stay with me all the time.

Still, he’d remained at my side until I woke up. I was truly grateful for that.

“Yuka-san, would you mind chatting with me for a while?”

“Of course. However, I do have one request...”

At that moment, both of our stomachs let out loud growls. I imagined Yuka-san must have been just as anxious over the situation and unable to eat anything either.

“In other words...may I please have a sandwich too?”

Yuka-san sounded embarrassed, but her request finally put a smile on my face.

I wasn’t sure if this was her way of looking out for me, or if she was simply being silly, but I adored how natural she made it sound.

“That’s fine. I’m sure they’ll taste better when we have them together instead of eating alone.”

After this, it was Yuka-san who stayed at my side in place of Tachibana, who was busy commanding the full forces of the Keika Group.

Our late-night sandwiches were our little secret and a memory we would never forget.

To be safe, I took the entire week off to rest and receive counseling. I returned to school the next week.

“Oh, Runa, are you doing better?”

“For now, I think so.”

I answered Eiichi-kun with a smile. After that, Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun greeted me too.

“Good morning, Keikain-san. I’m glad to see you’re looking well.”

“Good morning.”

It was a perfectly average morning, and yet it felt so dear to my heart. That was why I said hello to them just like it was any other day.

“Good morning, everyone.”

I greeted them despite the way the world had changed. As the person who’d been unable to stop it, what right did I have to experience such normalcy?



At the very least, Islamic extremists had been the ones responsible for those acts of terrorism, and now there were already many voices calling for an attack on Afghanistan, the country that sheltered them. Those calls came from all around the world, but the United States was the one who kicked them off.

However, it was the military, the ones who would carry out such an attack, who were cradling their heads in anguish.

The reason for that was the geography of Afghanistan.

“Since it’s a landlocked country, I’m sure it’d be tricky to manage without building a base...”

We were having a study session after school. It was Eiichi-kun who brought up the topic to me as he looked at a world map in the newspaper. I focused on my homework while casually responding to his assessment. Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun were out for a student council meeting.

“It’s hard to tell what Pakistan is going to do. Their army is connected with Islamic extremists, so although they want to follow along with the United States, being open about that position could lead to a coup d’état in the country. The northern alliance seems to be building more defenses, but it sounds like it’s an intense struggle.”

After the terrorist attacks, Afghanistan’s internal government went on the offensive against the northern alliance, almost as if it been planned in advance. This forced the alliance to launch a defensive war. There was also a failed terrorist attack against their general, which could have caused the alliance to crumble if it had been successful.

The US reacted cleverly to this. They negotiated with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, two countries on Afghanistan’s border, to place bases on their lands, then began using PMCs to support the northern alliance.

They hadn’t yet breached the border of Afghanistan, but of course the small armies dispatched to both neighboring countries were former US soldiers in the guise of PMC employees. If they received the diplomatic go-ahead to make these deployments of soldiers in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan official, they would remove the concealing tape over the flags on their uniforms, but right now they

didn't even reveal the fact that they were hiding anything.

Japan supported their dispatch to the two countries. Our ally had been attacked, and we had no mercy for the attempted terrorism in our own homeland. Therefore, Prime Minister Koizumi gave permission to prepare the dispatch of the JSDF, and our own PMCs were on the verge of mobilizing before the US asked us to hold off.

"Please let us be the first ones to give those guys a good smack in the face."

I didn't know if such negotiations really occurred or not, but the US had purchased bases and connections in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and our own PMCs were now prepared to go in after the second deployment.

However, we still didn't hesitate to provide them with weapons and ammunition. Armed insurgents from the areas of Afghanistan that had once been invaded by the Soviets were familiar with Eastern-made weapons, and the government had pushed us to buy weapons and ammo manufactured in Northern Japan at stock-clearing prices.

Their goal was to obtain thirty T-72 tanks, so the Akamatsu Corporation purchased tanks from the JSDF, which the Tajikistan government would then buy from them. A Russian airline company was constantly chartering An-124s to this end, which showed that Russia had no intentions of making enemies here either.

These prized items were purchased via Tajikistan's employment of the United...*ahem*...the employment of PMCs, who of course would cross the border to deliver them to the northern alliance. Yes, that's right. In addition to tanks, there were also anti-tank rockets, other such weapons and ammo, food, medical supplies... These mountains of goods would crossing the border on trucks too.

I'm sure the PMC soldiers in both countries can't say it, but they really just belong to the US special forces.

"The pride of the American military, their airstrikes, will require them to fly over Pakistan, so everyone is focusing on how Pakistan is going to respond."

"So that's what this is for..."

Eiichi-kun sighed as he looked at the international page of the newspaper. A large article covered the deaths and injuries that resulted from a shooting by Islamic terrorists during their attack on the Indian parliamentary building. India was now essentially preparing for war and, with Pakistan doing the same, it was turning into a touch-and-go situation.

“If this chaos is the terrorists’ goal, then they’re one step ahead of us right now.”

“This is happening because of the end of the Cold War and the Gulf War. You could say that the debt from those times is being paid now.”

At the very least, if India and Pakistan went to war, Afghanistan would have to be set aside for the moment.

In order to gather and maintain an army, a base of some sort would be needed, and the most efficient area was Karachi Harbor in Pakistan. The coming battles would determine whether Pakistan could survive without succumbing to terrorist forces.

We also don’t know if the terrorists have a nuke...

I fell silent and thought about my main concerns: the terrorists’ successful use of the internet and the declaration of the nuclear threat.

“We have to make our own decisions. But the West is trying to force us to follow their lead! We can’t fear their power anymore! We’ve gained that strength for ourselves now!”

It was good that I intentionally avoided using the word “nukes.” I had been sent into a frenzy by those nukes and, after all of that, I had the shame of the terrorist attacks to deal with too. I certainly couldn’t ignore it now.

Not only had the terrorist attacks been successful, but they had stirred up fundamentalists in the Middle East and led them to viciously criticize governments associated with the United States. It felt like we were on the brink of World War III.

“Runa, don’t push yourself so hard.”

Suddenly, I heard Eiichi-kun’s completely unrelated words in my ear.

Somewhere along the way he had started to stare at me with a completely serious look on his face. My hands froze over my homework. When he saw how I'd stiffened in response to him, Eiichi-kun spoke up slowly again.

"It's okay to cry."

Ah, I see. I completely forgot to cry. When this realization hit me, my vision blurred with tears.

"I'll be back in a second. I'm going to make sure no one else comes in here."

When I heard that, I couldn't hold it in anymore. Eiichi-kun left to close the door, and that was when my tears finally spilled over and I started weeping loudly. Eiichi-kun didn't try to interfere.

"Thank you. I'm really having a hard time."

After I cried and cried and cried as much as I could, he handed me a handkerchief and smiled to try to cheer me up.

"It's okay. Now I know you're a kid, just like the rest of us."

Ba-dump. That smile made my heart speed up.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Who knows? We should get going. Yuujirou and Mitsuya are waiting."

I couldn't let myself focus on something like that. There was no time for it.

"Right. Let's go."

But I didn't want to forget Eiichi-kun's smile and warmth. I stuck the damp handkerchief in my pocket and followed him from behind. *I wonder, am I selfish for thinking about this?*

Glossary and notes

Reinforced armor skeleton: *Keroberos Saga.*

Sweeping: Not the act of tidying up a room...but of searching it for listening

devices and other such threats.

Northern alliance: One group of armed insurgents in Afghanistan. One of their leading generals would be assassinated in a coordinated terrorist attack, and they would later cooperate with Afghan air raids to help take out the Taliban.

Aircraft bomber crashing with a hydrogen bomb on board: Events like the Thule Air Base and Palomares B-52 crashes.

PT-23: Actually called the RT-23 in English. An ICBM equipped on a train. They're transported by railroad, so it's very difficult to supplement them.

Denver and Baltimore: *Atomic Train* and *The Sum of All Fears*.

The newest movie by the master anime director: *Spirited Away*.

The new theme park: Tokyo Disney Sea.

The paranormal research department that's not a TV show: *The X-Files*.

The landlocked country dilemma: Bombing Afghanistan with air raids would require the military to fly over Iran or Pakistan's territory. In real life, the two countries pretended not to notice the US Air Force.

Pakistani government: The military is stronger than the government, so the chief of the general staff serves as president. The military's intelligence bureau is a powerful agency, and they were secretly supporting Islamic fundamentalism

while also leading the country's nuclear development.

The attack on the Indian parliamentary building: In real life, this occurred in December of the same year. It was after Afghanistan had been somewhat cleaned up, so the chronology was different, but in this story, the timing was perfect for an atmosphere of possible war between India and Pakistan.

Chapter 7:

Article Extracts/Terrorism Stories

“LET’S SEE. What do I remember from that day? I was in one of the rooms on the ferry from my lodge. That’s right, I saw the news when I was resting in the main hall. No one could look away from the TV for a single second. After a while, an announcement came through the speakers telling all hands to go on high alert. I still remember how the higher-ups were trying to contact people in a panic.

We happened to be in the middle of a typhoon and had plans to help with disaster relief the next day, so we knew we would probably be receiving emergency orders to deploy, but the actual job ended up being to defend the city. In other words, it felt like the police and JSDF had been sent out for something else.

How long did it take...? I think it was after the Twin Towers fell that an inspector from the Metropolitan Police Department came and told us we would be under their authority now. He also gave us permission to arm ourselves.

I used to be a Northern Japanese soldier and I can use weapons like anyone else. But I still remember how painful it was to see that all the blood had drained from the inspector’s face.

When I was in the army, the elite officers at the barracks often looked the exact same way.

I remember trying to encourage them. ‘Don’t worry, enemies hardly ever come here.’ The enemy this time was an airplane, so I didn’t try to crack a joke and say that we’d be dead by the time it came down from above.”

—RECOLLECTION OF A MEMBER OF A CERTAIN SECURITY FIRM.

“I was at Haneda Airport when it happened. I was planning to get on the last plane to New Chitose Airport. While I was waiting at the terminal, everything on

the departures board suddenly disappeared and the planes started getting listed as 'delayed' one by one.

They came on the speakers to announce that all flights were delayed, but the TV in the room was what told us the entire story. The Twin Towers had gone up in smoke.

I can't really remember how much time went by. I think it was the next day, after the towers collapsed and the government made an announcement, when the police officers, guards, and JSDF officers drove up to the airport and started taking up posts there.

The JSDF were carrying guns and everything. They also handed out blankets and food rations, which I remember really appreciating. Still, the sight of it all just made me so uneasy.

The airport was finally shut down the next day. I spent the night in a waiting room being watched by the JSDF, police, and security guards, then took the shinkansen back home. I couldn't go all the way to Hachinohe yet, so traveling from Morioka was a really rough trip."

—RECOLLECTION OF A CERTAIN TRAVELER

"I watched the footage in the trading room and didn't want to accept what I was seeing. I can't remember who said it, but I can still hear the voice of someone in the room going, 'This is going to shake things up like never before.'

The IT bubble had burst on the American stock market and the prices were already falling, but I remember thinking that they were going to absolutely plummet.

The New York Stock Exchange ended up halting trading on that day, but considering the losses that were sure to happen, I could hardly blame the higher-ups' plan to sell everything off at the opening bell. Despite that, the fund's trading computer crashed and started giving 'buy' orders instead.

Seriously? In the middle of a giant sell-off?!

Our boss apparently passed out when he saw the TV, so since he couldn't give any instructions, we sold everything off and got ready to eat the loss.

The result? You guessed it. The computer was right. The boss laughed off the few hundred billion we lost that day, but I still try not to think about that crash on the NYSE.

General Energy Online collapsed after that. It was a real mess.

I'm one of the few who can even talk about the whole thing like this."

—RECOLLECTION OF A CERTAIN TRADER

"Planes started flying again a while later, but they were all empty. I'm sure no one wanted to fly after everything that happened, but that just meant that the shinkansen and boats were all packed. Not only did the government speed up the construction work to extend the Hachinohe Shinkansen, but the railway companies also decided to take the plunge and offer a lot more night trains. The Jouestu, Nagano, Yamagata, and Akita Shinkansen of Tohoku are all going to be extended to Tokyo, and since the platforms at the terminal stations of Ueno and Tokyo don't have enough room, they're setting up the Shinjuku Shinkansen in a panic. This means that the temporary night trains departing from Ueno will be very luxurious rides... Pardon me. I've gone off topic.

I flew AIRHO from Haneda to New Chitose Airport. The Boeing 737-700 I was on could hold about 100 passengers, but I flew right after the attacks, so I don't think there were even thirty people on board.

That airline company is famous for having cute Russian maids working their cabin, but for the first time, I found them to be much cooler and more composed than 'cute.' I learned later that this company's cabin crew consists entirely of ex-Northern Japanese female soldiers. Supposedly, they were prepared for the worst and trained for combat against terrorists and hijackings.

I think they're called sky marshals over in America, where the attacks happened. They apparently have them on board flights now. The times really have changed."

—RECOLLECTION OF A CERTAIN TRAVEL WRITER

"As I recall, I first met her at the preliminary meeting for a department store

photo shoot.

I was just doing my job too, but I still remember how intense the management I was dealing with was, and we had different visions for the shoot.

When things like that happen, I always decide to just go to the place myself. A department store has to be used to dealing with people, after all.

That was when I first laid eyes on her. Ah, that was the moment I knew I had to take this job just so that I could photograph her.

I didn't stop bothering her until I convinced her. When the store later told me who she was, they asked me to restrain myself, but it's not as if I knew beforehand. That's just what artists are like.

My photographs captured moments of her existence, preserved them for eternity, and remained behind as pieces of history.

That was why I forced my way into any job that involved her, and I managed to capture that photograph because of the way she smiled awkwardly and allowed me to participate.

It was the moment she collapsed when she saw the airplane hit one of the Twin Towers, just as the prime minister reached out to catch her. It's the best photograph I've ever taken in my career.

I'd be willing to quit my job if I ever got the chance to photograph her nude, but she's got all those guards all the time.

What about you? You got any good ideas?"

—RECOLLECTION OF A CERTAIN PHOTOGRAPHER

"The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism has begun to accelerate all action associated with the creation of the Offshore Town Act. Committee member Ichijou proposed the law to the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy in order to create a type of gated community, and after the recent terrorist attacks, debate has progressed and the law is expected to be passed this autumn during a special session of the Diet. This comes after public safety concerns stemming from recent terrorist attacks. The discovery by metropolitan police that criminals and backing groups had used a boathouse on Tokyo Bay as

their headquarters was also a major factor. Land prices within the city have dropped to less than half of what they were during the bubble, but they are still not within the price range of the average city resident, and boathouses have been identified as threats due to their proclivity to become hotbeds of crime as centers for the demanding jobs worked by second-class citizens. This new law is set to be a counter to the rapid increase in boathouses, and plans for a town with a population of ten thousand occupants are being made with Kisarazu as a trial city. The city will use several three-hundred-ton deteriorated tankers, with a residential area on the top layer and a bottom layer containing infrastructure such as water pipes, sewage, and power generation. With an estimated budget of 20 billion yen, the ten-thousand-occupant city of strung-together tankers is already a sought-after destination for the wealthier second-class populace who struggle to find housing...”

“The Keika Group is planning to restructure its card business on a massive scale. Until now, Keika Holdings and Teisei Department Stores have maintained separate card systems, but they are now set to merge. East Japan Imperial Railway Company’s planned IC card release will also feature cash and debit card functions to meet this standard. Keika Group is enacting the same plan for their company staff IDs in order to further popularize these cards. They have also received permission from the Tokyo, Hokkaido, and Karafuto government offices to coordinate in creating personal ID functions with these cards. They will be treated as official identification by allowing a cardholder to register their address, cell phone number, and ID photo, with the goal of providing legal protections to second-class citizens who have yet to register. There are many reported cases of these citizens lacking personal identification and being rejected from schools and jobs in the wake of the coordinated terrorist attacks. The national government had been working to handle this issue, but local governments and private companies have beaten them to the punch by creating official identification documents to protect their employees. These cards will come in multiple varieties. Red cards are for personal identification and require consignment pay, orange cards have a cash payment feature for train rides, yellow cards function identically to cash cards, green cards serve as credit cards, and more. The highest tier of card, the ultraviolet card, is exclusive to people

such as nobles and zaibatsu members, and the Keika Group has publicly stated that it is currently held by only one person. The opposing party has criticized the administration for its slow response...”

“Sybil, a temporary worker agency which is a subsidiary of Akamatsu Corporation, is garnering attention. By using its top-of-the line supercomputer (also known as Sybil) to regularly post employment trends to the internet, they hope to help improve the country’s unemployment rates. They have partnered with recruiting agencies and the Public Employment Security Office to register and update job listings daily. Not only does this assist in visualizing which industries are recruiting in local areas, but it also displays data based on the user’s cell phone GPS. Additionally, listings show the required qualifications for each job, the cost and time required to earn each one, and whether the local government will provide assistance. It’s a step to improve employment rates that have fallen after the recent terrorist attacks. Sybil’s display of national and local employment data shows that hard labor jobs continue to hold strong within cities, with second-class citizens and the general population scrambling for these forms of work...”

“The civil war in Afghanistan is increasing in intensity. Armed Islamic extremist insurgents have failed in their all-out attacks against the northern alliance, and while the alliance appears to be attempting to reclaim the critical city of Mazar-i-Sharif, the insurgents are threatening to retaliate with weapons of mass destruction, increasing instability in the region. Mazar-i-Sharif is currently believed to be held by Islamic insurgents, and attacks on all fronts by the insurgents have left the northern alliance struggling to find the power to take the offensive.

The neighboring countries of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have sent in volunteer soldiers in support of the northern alliance and, upon receiving reports of large tanks crossing the border, insurgents have accused the countries of international interference in what has become a touch-and-go situation. The United States, after suffering terrorist attacks, is quietly backing these volunteers to ensure the northern alliance survives until Congress officially

approves the use of military force in Afghanistan...”

“I’ll summarize the mission now. Your client is the shell company Freedom Force. They’re seeking the elimination of enemy guerrilla forces occupying Salang Pass.

It’s the last protective fortress for the Afghanistan capital of Kabul, and the guerrilla fighters have left regiments behind to defend the city. The pass contains tunnels that must be protected at all costs.

You will receive backup in the form of multinational air fleets.

You can contact them by... We look forward to your successful execution of the mission.”

“I’ll explain the mission. Your employer is ISI.

The goal is complete destruction of guerrilla forces’ supply facilities at Khyber Pass.

Pakistan currently opposes the armed Islamic organizations responsible for the terrorist attacks, but many volunteer soldiers in the country sympathize with the enemy guerrilla forces and are giving them support. The special forces of one particular country are planning a mission to annihilate their opponents, but I want you to take care of this before then. It’s a dangerous job, but the pay will be well worth the risk. We don’t care if you have to eliminate all of them.

We have three Mi-24s ready for this mission.

We’ll be waiting to hear from you.”

“Allow me to explain the mission.

The client is Kitakaba Security, a subsidiary of Akamatsu Corporation.

Would you gentlemen understand it better if I called them the Escort Guard for Her Little Majesty?

Your job will be providing military advice to the northern alliance troops.

With the support of multinational forces, the alliance is hoping to break through Salang Pass, but their army is disorganized and they need training and advisors. In particular, they'll need the thirty T-72 tanks provided by Freedom Force to penetrate the pass and capture the capital of Kabul afterward. This is top secret information, but Akamatsu Corporation is reportedly preparing to hand over even more tank forces to the northern alliance. In other words, the military advisor jobs will be long-term assignments, but they'll be a good chance to form relationships with Kitakaba Security and Akamatsu Corporation.

That doesn't sound like a bad deal to me. We'll be waiting to hear whether you've accepted the mission."

"This is an unofficial mission from the Revolutionary Guard.

Your goal is to occupy and defend Herat, one of the three major cities in Afghanistan.

Herat is currently occupied by armed insurgents, but the northern alliance is sending an army to recapture it. The goal of your mission is to take control of Herat before they arrive and keep them out of the city. Once you've captured Herat and find yourself up against the northern alliance's forces, the Revolutionary Guard will cross the border under the pretext of cleaning up the insurgents and rescuing liberating armies. This will qualify the location as a target for aerial bombings by multinational armies, but we are unable to influence that outcome. Your payment will be worthwhile.

Get in touch if you're ready to put your life on the line."

"This is an unofficial mission from RAW.

Your mission is to infiltrate Pakistan and investigate their nuclear management.

Multinational forces are currently intervening in Afghanistan, and the Indian Parliament House on the India-Pakistan border sustained an attack. In response, it has transitioned to a wartime regime for the duration the ongoing confrontation. The troublemakers are armed insurgents under the influence of

ISI, and we can't deny that RAW may have transferred nuclear weapons to them, or that ISI may use them on Afghanistan. Mossad will be backing this investigation.

I'll be waiting for your response."

"Your client is the construction organization of the Tokyo Bay offshore town.

Construction is progressing at the Kisarazu Sea now that the Offshore Town Act passed in the current Diet session. The goal is to work in conjunction with the construction site's guards to take down the demonstrations against the removal of second-class citizens that broke out after the coordinated terrorist attacks.

The second-class citizens are rumored to be colluding with crime syndicates, and the organization doesn't want this turning into a second Sakata Conflict.

Due to enemy moles in the local government, this job must remain a top-secret mission until the end.

You'll be paid in advance... It doesn't sound like a bad deal to me, but what do you think?"

"Your client's identity is a secret, but the pay will be more than worth your time.

Your target is the Shinjuku Geofront. You're going to investigate and destroy it.

Japan has managed to avoid the experiencing the coordinated terrorist attacks that the world witnessed, but our goal is to make them feel that terror. Local extremists have promised their support, so get in touch with them.

Also, if you're interested in revolutionizing the world, I'll reveal the client to you. I'll be waiting for notice of your acceptance."

Chapter 8: Column: The Hell of Afghanistan

THE COALITION OF THE WILLING'S intervention in the Afghanistan Civil War resulted in the victory of the northern alliance.

The problem arose afterward when the inexperienced government saw pushback in the form of anti-American sentiment. Then volunteer soldiers from Pakistan arrived in southern Afghanistan, formed a base there, and began a counteroffensive of armed insurgents.

Meanwhile, the United States military managed to drive the insurgents out of the capital city before heading to Iraq to focus their firepower there. The Coalition of the Willing provided funds to support public order in Afghanistan, and the United Nations put approved PMCs in charge of their provisional government.

The main figures in these PMCs were former soldiers from Russia, Northern Japan, and India. The first two countries participated for profit, while India became involved due to the Kashmir issue and the desire for revenge over terrorist attacks on their parliamentary building.

However, after America retained their aerial superiority and expressed their intent to leave Afghanistan, the vast majority of Afghans separated from the country's new government and rallied around the Pashtuns, a parent body for the armed insurgents that began to revolt in Southern Afghanistan. Volunteer soldiers from neighboring Pakistan poured in simultaneously for a successful recapture of the capital.

To the PMCs, this was not only predictable, but welcome. In particular, the former Indian soldiers-turned-mercenaries had no intention of promoting Afghanistan's welfare, and Russia's past also meant their people were eager to lend a hand in revenge.

Later, Afghanistan's entire southern region was attacked with chemical weapons and weapons of mass destruction in what was known as the Kandahar

Massacre.

Naturally, international society verbally condemned these actions, but when the media continued to broadcast the panic in the United States after the terrorist assault on the Twin Towers and the anthrax attacks seven days later, both sides merely expressed sympathy for the regions involved, and thus the tragedy was brushed under the rug.

The indiscriminate poison gas and cluster warhead attacks left three hundred thousand Afghans dead, according to the official numbers. The absurd part of the tragedy was how everyone managed to find justifications for it.

The United States outwardly condemned the massacre, which hadn't been carried out by its own soldiers, but the American people were thrilled by this act of "revenge" for the terrorist attacks they had suffered. It was the same in Russia, which had experienced losses at Afghanistan's hands long ago, and India too, because of their own recent terrorist attacks.

Afghanistan's provisional government, which was mostly led by ethnic minorities within the country, created a power struggle by attempting to use their political authority to damage the Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in the country. The Pashtuns used their victimhood to appeal for the support of the Islamic holy warriors, and Pakistan, which was struggling to deal with radicals within their largely Pashtun country, was happy to send them to Afghanistan as volunteer soldiers. This was part of their tightening of domestic control.

When Iraq, the US's next target, saw this violence, they decided they needed weapons of mass destruction to combat this strife and began seeking them out. This happened right under the nose of US intelligence agencies, who were looking for an excuse for war.

"America has slaughtered our people! Let us get revenge on them and their allies! Brothers, it's time to release our fury!!"

The photograph of the graffiti written on the wall in Kandahar, the city of the dead, became famous overnight, but what gained even more fame was the graffiti added next to it. The author was unknown, but most likely a PMC soldier.

"You and your brothers will be wiped out with nukes."

It was said that nuclear weapons were never used after that because there was no appropriate target, but in one way, the message was very accurate.

When international society began forming strategies based on whether or not the US was enraged enough to use nuclear weapons, they were forced to show their true colors.

This would later become the pretext for the Iraq War, and while its legitimacy is still debated, that was the reason they gave.

Furthermore, most documents reporting on the troops who participated in this slaughter are classified, and it is still impossible to uncover many facts.

However, only a nation can use a weapon of mass destruction, so it is theorized that the evidence presented by the United States actually originated from the Indian government.

Their affiliated squadron information is also classified, but one of the PMCs rumored to have come up with this justification is Kitakaba Integrated Securities. They have formally denied this accusation.

Glossary and notes

Offshore towns: Places like Kowloon Walled City and Gunkanjima. By the way, the boathouses remained for quite some time after the war.

Card company card colors: From the TTRPG *Paranoia*.

Mazar-i-Sharif: A pivotal city even as it was being covered in the news at the time. The fall of the city led to the downfall of the armed insurgents.

ISI: Pakistan's intelligence agency. They are the backbone of the Pakistani military and hold considerable influence in national politics.

Escort Guard: From the board game *Escort Fleet*.

Revolutionary Guard: The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. A separate military organization from Iran's official army that not only has air, land, and sea power, but also owns affiliated companies through their militia members. They are extremely anti-American and the government is mostly unable to control them. The Iranian government takes a stance of neutrality toward Afghanistan, even more so than the United States.

RAW: Research and Analysis Wing. The strongest special military agency of the Indian government.

Chapter 9:

The Moonlight Fund's Intelligence Meeting

MAZAR-I-SHARIF Air Force Base. This was a headquarters for the US military after their intervention in Afghanistan, and aircraft were constantly descending onto the runway, delivering troops and supplies.

The northern alliance was split into two groups. One army went to the critical town of Herat in the south, while the others stayed put in the capital, Kabul. The special military forces, who no longer needed to hide their identities, returned freely to the Stars and Stripes. They handed the weapons and equipment they'd used to disguise themselves back over to the northern alliance.

Most of the equipment, that is.

Even the leading tank battalions had returned their vehicles. What they and the other American troops weren't handing over was...food. Or, more specifically, microwave curry and cup noodles. Japanese-made, of course.

The United States military had purchased a supply of food and weapons from a Japanese trading company that had previously established bases in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to give to the PMCs. The first special forces to arrive in the Afghanistan War fell victim to the cunning Japanese trap.

"It's so damn good."

Who could blame them for thinking that? They were tired of constantly eating field rations, and now they had a delicious meal with the help of nothing but hot water. Strangely enough, curry in particular became a daily meal distributed to the soldiers. It was beloved as a luxurious dinner. The wicked invention of adding curry to cup noodles bewitched the souls of many troops.

The cup noodles weren't overshadowed, either.

"Starvation. Cold. Wanting to die. That's the order misfortune comes in."

Those words supposedly came from the region that invented cup noodles,

and they could be seen as an example of how a warm meal could boost morale.

The temperature differences in Afghanistan, a land of arid mountains, meant that it became very cold at night. It was hard to describe just how much the soldiers appreciated every warm meal they got to eat.

Thus, the daily rations were bolstered by this beloved combination of microwave curry and cup noodles. The American troops who arrived later were, of course, extremely jealous, and they got hooked too. These rations became currency as valuable as cigarettes and booze.

“So damn good.”

The Japanese trading company amassing goods in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan took the opportunity to email the logistics coordinator in charge of buying supplies for the special forces. The people who received this message said, “Their timing is even more incredible than what a drug dealer could pull off.”

“How about we send them to you as a personal purchase?”

“Sounds good!”

Of course, a heroic battle ensued. *“How come you get to eat all the good stuff?!”* It could easily have devolved into actual murder on the battlefield. Fights were breaking out over stolen curry, and the words spoken by the military police who tried the instigating food for themselves told the entire story.

“So damn good.”

It was a perfect example of how people can underestimate the passion inspired by Japanese food. The higher-ranking US officers, who had experienced Vietnam in their youth, all cradled their heads in their hands when they learned of such a wild situation. They knew just how far morale could fall because of gross, repetitive meals.

So they decided to find a solution: ordering massive amounts of curry and cup noodles from the company.

It went without saying that the company’s coordinator chuckled about it in his room at Kudanshita Keika Tower. However, his one miscalculation was being

promoted too quickly by the higher-ups, meaning he no longer needed to accomplish any great achievements.

“Huh? Hey, Tachibana, why is Teisei Food Services seeing such a huge uptick in sales?”

“I believe Akamatsu Corporation is shipping massive orders overseas.”

“Hmm... Maybe there’s a Japanese food craze going on over there?”

Cup ramen and microwave curry were two of Japan’s proudest strategic resources. Many soldiers across different battlefields were chanting these words like a spell:

“It’s so damn good!”

Okazaki Yuuichi, the man who had taken advantage of that situation for his own personal success, puffed on his cigarette in the trading room.

In Kudanshita Keika Tower, the base of the Moonlight Fund in Tokyo, there was a row of monitors displaying information from around the world, but it was a place their owner Keikain Runa rarely entered. It simply reeked of cigarettes inside. Most of the executives’ announcements to her were made in her personal office, which they jokingly referred to as the “throne room.”

“It looks as though the worst is over in Afghanistan...”

The monitor was showing news about the recapture of Mazar-i-Sharif, an important city in northern Afghanistan, by the northern alliance.

“I’ve got chills. I thought the US military was going to nuke it off the map. Does this mean it’s safe to say that the Pashtun insurgents don’t have nuclear weapons?”

Still dressed in her secretary clothes, Angela puffed on her own cigarette just like Okazaki as she stared at the monitor with a stern look. As a professional, she was determined to take a shower before her mistress returned and wash the cigarette smell from her body.

Propaganda was already spreading that the recapturing of Mazar-i-Sharif had been accomplished with the support of US aerial bombings but was otherwise planned independently by the northern alliance. In truth, it was an assault by a

regiment of US special forces who pretended to be volunteer soldiers. Under the threat of nuclear attacks, the American president gave a simple go-ahead order, and this became an overwhelmingly clear display of force.

“If they do have them and end up bombing Kabul, they’ll lose all support from the public. They’re supposed to protect the capital, so nuking anything nearby would be like destroying the city with their own hands. The problem is Pakistan. It would be a nightmare if they recklessly brought in a nuke, and even without it, the strength of their military is still a threat. They’re trying their best to stop it, but many volunteer soldiers are getting into Afghanistan. Taking the capital is going to become a lot harder.”

The generals of the northern alliance were maintaining power and planning to retake the capital. On top of that, the generals who had fled to Turkey were being supported by foreign nations and preparing to return to their homeland too. The tide had shifted completely in favor of the northern alliance.

However, India would be forced to react to Pakistan’s next move, and Afghanistan could be dragged into a major war between the two countries.

“The Pakistani army must have sent anyone suspicious in their ranks to Afghanistan. We’ve received an unofficial statement from Pakistan’s diplomatic sources telling us that those men are volunteer soldiers.”

It was the active CIA agent, Eva, who responded in a bored tone while still wearing her maid uniform. In other words, Pakistan was signaling that they wanted the soldiers to be dealt with as guerrilla fighters.

It was proof of the Pakistani government’s internal instability. The United States needed to build an airbase in Afghanistan territory to drive them away, and the critical site for it was Mazar-i-Sharif.

“So they’re really going to do it?” Okazaki asked Angela, his question intentionally vague.

“Wouldn’t it be stranger if they didn’t?” she responded firmly.

They were both staring at a map of Iraq on the monitor.

“We need an enemy. The American people will never see these people in the desert as the true source of the evil that wiped out the Twin Towers and

attacked the White House and Pentagon!”

Afghanistan was just the opening act. Their real target was Iraq, or rather, the US wanted to settle what was left of the Gulf War. That was how angry they had become.

“Well, as someone from the country that enraged your people at Pearl Harbor, I’ll hold my tongue. So do you think they’re going to nuke Afghanistan?”

Okazaki found it hard to speak when he imagined how much blood the United States would demand as payment. As compensation for provoking them, Japan had lost lives not just during World War II, but also in the Manchurian War, Vietnam War, and Gulf War. The US even had a part in the tragic division of Japan when the Northern Japanese government came to be.

Revenge was a form of national honor for the States. That honor was tarnished during their loss in Vietnam, only to finally be regained again in their Gulf War victory.

“We want to, but we have nothing to fire at.”

Eva had just said something quite significant. In response to the asymmetrical offensive moves of coordinated terrorist attacks and anthrax, the United States had apparently been on the verge of using nuclear bombs and other weapons of mass destruction in Afghanistan.

The reason that didn’t happen was simple: there was nothing of value to be gained by blowing up Afghanistan.

“America can’t use the Nagashima Doctrine like this country did in Vietnam.”

The Nagashima Doctrine was modeled after Oda Nobunaga’s attacks on Nagashima Hongan-ji. He cornered both his enemies and the local people up against a seaside cliff and had his battleship canons blow them away.

During the Tet Offensive, the area held by the JSDF was destroyed by the Viet Cong, and while they suffered few losses, the intense criticism from the opposition party caused a political controversy that ended up taking down the cabinet, while the US continued research as an anti-guerrilla warfare trump card. This plan would later prove to be greatly effective during the Gulf War, but that was a different story altogether.

“So they’re planning on doing the same thing in Iraq. This has just been the opening act, so they can’t spend too much time here.”

Okazaki sighed. The United States still only had air support and special forces in the Afghanistan War, but they were preparing to dispatch ground troops as well. Problems would arise if those ground forces gathered at a base anywhere other than Bahrain.

The island nation of Bahrain was connected by bridges to Saudi Arabia, which in turn bordered Iraq. Naturally, PMCs were gathered in Bahrain, and American military forces disguised as PMCs were applying for long-term use of the *Diamond Actress* and *Diamond Prima Donna*.

They knew what it meant that the US was after high-speed ferries.

“Aren’t those the ships that connect the Tokyo and Hokkaido routes? How are they going to replace them...?”

It was Kitagumo Ryouko who responded to Okazaki’s murmurings. She was their contact with the security department.

“We’ll just have to preserve the boats we’re using now.”

It was the beginning of the “Let’s use our aging boats carefully and forever” plan. Their current boats weighed around fourteen thousand tons, and the original plan was to exchange four ships for two of twice the size, but that would end up getting scrapped.

“Do it fast, then. Before the euro gains real power.”

Angela’s simple command was merciless and persuasive.

Even if the dollar could no longer be converted into gold, it had been the main form of payment used in oil dealings until now, which was why it remained a hard currency. By the way, the massive EU marketplace would give birth to the euro the following year.

Iraq, Libya, and other anti-American countries had declared that they would deal in euros for oil transactions, which could potentially shake faith in the dollar.

This hurt the honor of the US, but in a currency initiative war they had as

much to lose as they did to gain. They would need to beat a formidable enemy in order to regain that honor.

Furthermore, Libya had behaved peacefully toward them ever since the terrorist attacks, but Iraq was the same as ever.

“If that’s the plan, then what about info on the nuke we found?”

Angela simply smiled at Okazaki’s joke.

Iraq, which was trying to purchase nuclear weapons, would make for an easy enemy in the shadow of the terrorist attacks. American justice could be dispatched there without hesitation.

But the US had contacted the Palestine Liberation Organization in order to prevent the problem of Palestine from coming up in the same way Iraq had during the Gulf War. Naturally, Israel was forced to make large concessions after offending the United States with this turmoil.

“That’s why consensus building is so important in international society. I’m home!”

Anisha entered the room dressed in her maid uniform, having returned from a trip to Russia that she described as a paid vacation to see her family.

As a man the mistress had her eye on, Okazaki was a target for seduction by these women of the intelligence agencies. They sometimes flattered him with attention. But he would never let them get the better of him like that, which was part of what made him such a capable man.

“Welcome back, Anisha-chan. Got any tales of your travels to share with us?”

“Let’s see. Most of the oligarchs who oppose the president were cozying up to him. It looks like they’re just about done trying to take over military circles too.”

The biggest reason Okazaki was selected was for his knowledge about the Russian coup d’état.

Last year, a Russian nuclear submarine had sunk in an accident in the Arctic Ocean. The Russian defense minister was replaced when responsibility for the incident caught up to him, but he knew his ousting would mean the removal of all the generals under his command. To avoid this, he’d tried to use those

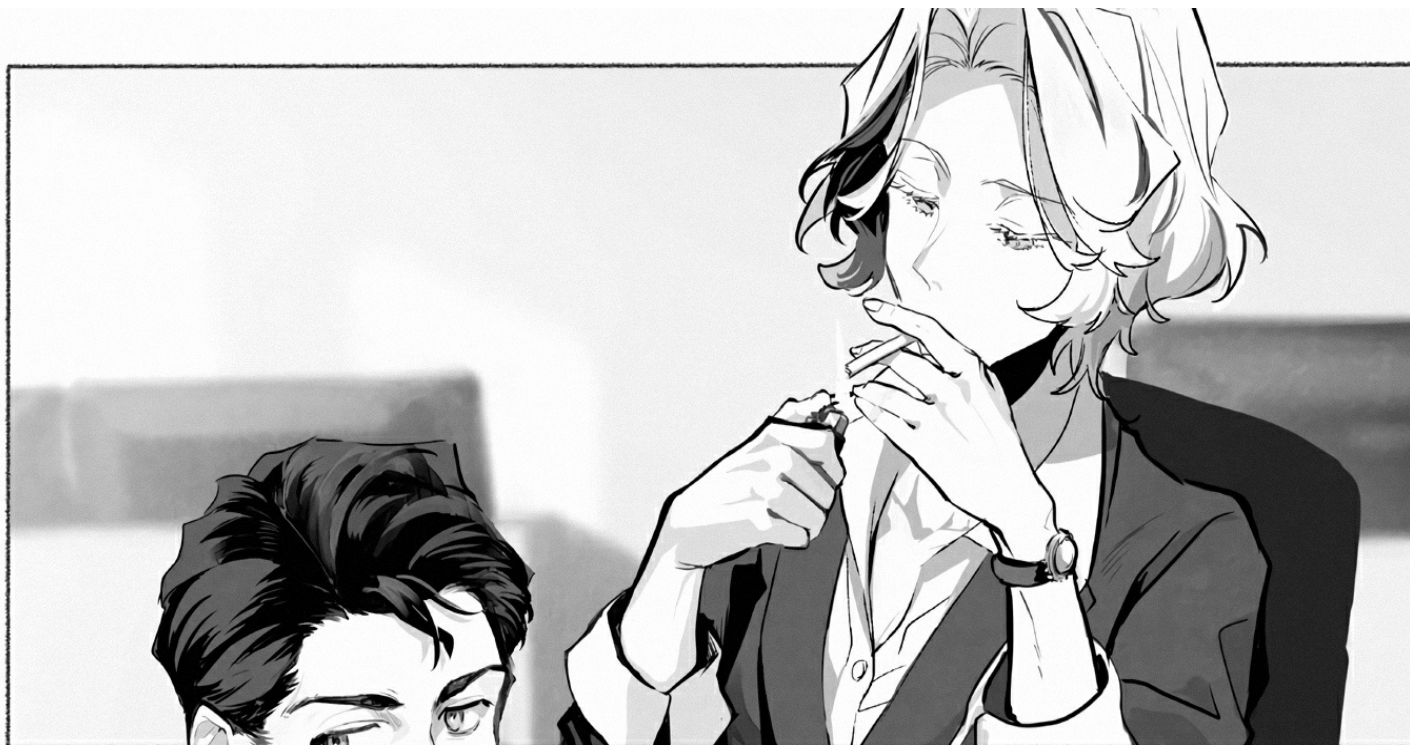
generals to start a coup d'état.

The anti-president oligarchs supplied them with money, as did the media mogul known as the puppet master in Russian politics. But they were found out, so the generals were overthrown and the mogul fled the country.

This was the story of the failed Russian coup d'état. And the person whom the media mogul had wanted to use as a centerpiece of the new administration was Keikain Runa.

“There’s no one left who can defy the president now. The only possibility would be our mistress, who the Russians call ‘the final oligarch’ for some reason. Anyway, it sounds like he wants to talk about resolving the Karafuto Crisis on a Russian-Japanese government level. But I’m sure it came down our channels, considering the state of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs right now. They only have one request to start with:

‘Don’t make your mistress the ruler of Russia or any neighboring country.’



If we can handle that, then it sounds like they're willing to be flexible."

Okazaki furrowed his brow when he heard what Anisha had to say. This topic was coming up because of the approaching war in Iraq.

The Far East probably wanted to soothe tensions over the potential conflict in the Middle East—a conflict that would far surpass Afghanistan. Between the missing nuke and the work of the Chechen guerrilla forces, the Russian government still couldn't be called stable.

"Later, we need to call Tachibana-san and decide what we should and shouldn't tell the mistress..."

"Wait a minute! What is this?!"

When Angela cried out, Okazaki looked over and saw that she was staring at a news article, her eyes wide with shock. A reputable American financial magazine was reporting suspicion of accounting fraud at General Energy Online.

My lady made the call to stop the joint water deal in California between Akamatsu Corporation and GEO, but never gave a reason for it, right? So that means she knew about this? How terrifying...

Okazaki kept those thoughts to himself, but had this to say:

"Let's keep an eye on the situation, but we should buy up all the crude oil we can for a while. If there's a war in Iraq, then oil prices will have nowhere to go but up."

Glossary and notes

Curry: Japanese curry is a wicked food that charms all the US soldiers in Japan.

Starvation. Cold. Wanting to die. That's the order misfortune comes in: From *Jarinko Chie*.

Afghanistan as the opening act: Going backward from the timeline of January 2002's "axis of evil" speech, the leadership of the American government must have been full of people who were already targeting Iraq immediately after the terrorist attacks. The real assault on Iraq began on March 20th, 2003.

Nagashima Doctrine: Originally from *Seito* by Satou Daisuke, Tokuma Shoten Publishing Co., Ltd.

Let's use our aging boats carefully and forever plan: From Niconico Douga's *Meiressha de Ikou* Series. This extreme modification joke immediately became famous.

Euro: Began circulating on January 1st, 2002. A conspiracy theory about the Iraq War is that the attacks were meant to protect the dollar. After this point in time, it was common to hear the name Hokkai Brent in addition to WTI in crude oil commodity futures.

The Russian nuclear submarine: The sinking of the *Kursk*. I read about this event in *Golgo 13*.

The Russian media mogul: Just happened to lose his position at this time.

Chapter 10:

The Lady's Field Trip: Elementary School Edition

OUR GROUP STOOD at the shinkansen platform at Tokyo Station. We were all dressed in our school uniforms.

“A field trip to Kyoto, huh? Well, I’m just glad we get one at all.”

“But didn’t you make the whole thing happen, Keikain-san? You’re so reckless...”

“You funded everything, right? I appreciate it, but are you sure that was smart, Keikain?”

I puffed up my chest proudly in response to the remarks from the usual crowd. This was just something a villainess had to do.

“Feel free to praise me some more if you want! I just didn’t want to lose our chance for a field trip.”

It had almost been canceled out of safety concerns after the coordinated terrorist attacks, but I decided to forcibly revive it by paying for it all myself.

After all, I was the main reason for the safety risk in the first place. I couldn’t just sit back and be responsible for that.

“I never thought it would get so exaggerated in the first place...”

I picked Kyoto because we could take the shinkansen there. It helped a lot that I was willing to pay for it.

We managed to rent out the whole shinkansen for ourselves. However, all we took was an eight-car Shikoku Shinkansen, the straight Tokaido trip. The eight-car train for Western Japan was operating as normal.

There were three Imperial Gakushuukan classes with one hundred students and ten teachers. We also brought thirty bodyguards and ten maids. Finally, there were three policemen with us for protection, making a total of 153 participants. That was how we managed to fill up eight whole cars by ourselves.

There was no doubt that it would be a comfortable trip.

“Everyone line up to get on the train!”

We followed our teacher’s instructions and boarded the shinkansen. We wanted everyone to enjoy themselves together, so we took the car with reserved seating instead of the first-class or luxury ones. Thus began our field trip.

Naturally, there were no women on this train who handed out frogs, nor did we receive any missions-to-transport letters.

“Here are some snacks and an orange. What’s on your mind, Runa-chan?”

“Thanks, Asuka-chan. I’m just so glad we could go on a field trip.”

“I really thought it was gone for good for a while. Right, Hotaru-chan?”

Asuka-chan, after giving me snacks and a mandarin, turned to Hotaru-chan in the next seat to get her opinion. She nodded her head.

The shinkansen left Tokyo Station right on time, and it would only take about three hours to reach Kyoto. We ended up having more free time than we thought, so everyone found their own ways to occupy themselves. I started to read the financial paper I’d bought at Tokyo Station, Asuka-chan listened to music on her MiniDisc player, and Hotaru-chan read a book.

“Are there any interesting articles, Keikain-san?”

It was Takahashi Akiko-san who called out to me from her seat across the aisle.

“Not at all. There’re all sorts of things going on in the world, but nothing terrible to speak of.”

The front page read *“Pressure on President of Furukawa Telecoms! With separation from the Ashio zaibatsu looming and banking organization...”* in big letters, even though I was actually the one doing the pressuring. Competition in the cell phone industry was getting more extreme, and if Furukawa was going to collapse in a war of attrition, I had the ulterior motive of getting them to join up with the newly restructured Shiyo Electric Co.

The government’s Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy had the company in

their sights, and so it was being kept under restraint in anticipation of future actions, but an announcement was definitely coming about a business partnership between Furukawa Telecoms and Shiyo Electric Co.

The paper said that while they were at it, they would save Ikeme Railways in Osaka after they applied for civil rehabilitation and force a merger with Echigo Engineering Co., but this was only mentioned at the very end of the article.

“By the way, what’ll we be doing after we arrive in Kyoto?”

I folded up the newspaper and checked the field trip guidebook. The trip was going to last three nights and four days, and it would begin with lunch at the Kyoto Keika Hotel near the station as soon as we arrived. After that, we would go sightseeing at Sanjusangen-do, Kiyomizu-dera, and Ginkaku-ji to finish off day one.

The second day\ consisted of having breakfast, traveling to Inari Station by train, seeing the torii gates at Fushimi Inari-taisha, and riding the train back to the hotel for lunch. We would finish out the day by traveling to Nijo Castle, Kinkakuji, Ryoanji, Ninna-ji, and Arashiyama.

The third day was for free time, and I could sightsee at Arashiyama or study at the railway museum. Finally, the fourth day was when we’d return home to Tokyo.

“Keikain-san, what are you planning on doing during your free time?” Kurimori-san called out to me from her seat next to Takahashi-san.

“I haven’t decided yet. I’m sure someone will invite me to join them for something.”

We girls all understood that we’d probably hang out and do things in our usual group, but it was more polite not to say so out loud.

With that, our shinkansen headed for Kyoto.

We arrived at Kyoto Station and walked all the way to the Kyoto Keika Hotel. Naturally, we’d rented out the whole place. It was time for lunch.

Everyone was quiet when we arrived at the restaurant.

“Hm? You don’t want to eat?”

The meal was soba, and we were supposed to stand at a bar to eat it. Udon was available as well.

I stood up, slurped on my soba, and began a lecture.

“Do you see how the broth looks diluted? This uses thin soy sauce, while soba in the Kanto region looks darker because they make it with dark soy sauce. They use ingredients that will suit the broth and let you add what you want. Also, if the soba isn’t enough for you, take some of the inarizushi or rice balls they’ve made for us.”

The raw egg in my bowl had turned nice and white while the jakoten bathed in the ocean of broth. A school of green onion fish swam around a croquette. I bit into each ingredient.

Everyone around me was dumbfounded by how natural I made it look.

“It’s great! My lifestyle always makes me so hungry for this kind of food!”

Seeing this, they were all fascinated enough to dig right into their own bowls. Of course, even for this standing soba, both the meal and its ingredients were made by the finest chefs of Keika Hotel. It certainly wasn’t going to be bad.

It didn’t take long for them to wordlessly slurp up all their soba.

“This is Sanjusangen-do, officially known as Rengeo-in, which was constructed as a royal villa for Emperor Go-Shirakawa...”

As the guide’s explanation entered my ears, I was overwhelmed by the presence of the endless Buddha statues. Apparently, there were 1,001 statues in total. As for my classmates’ impressions of this Buddha wonderland...

“My eyes are starting to spin.”

“Same here.”

I wondered why exactly there were so many.

We arrived next at Kiyomizu-dera. The sight of Kyoto in the late autumn was so beautiful from the famous Kiyomizu stage. A flock of wild geese soared

through the sky as the sun was beginning to set.

“How lovely! Coming here was worth it just to get a glimpse of this scenery.”

Then we went to a nearby café to enjoy plum kelp tea and unbaked yatsuhashi. They even had a souvenir shop that sold the usual kinds of celebrity merch, and quite a few people bought some.

“Don’t you want to get something, Runa-san?”

Kaoru-san was sitting next to me. I knew she must have quietly bought a souvenir, judging by the bag she was holding.

I glanced at it while I sipped my plum kelp tea.

“I can get my hands on most things already. The true grace of traveling is enjoying the scenery.”

“The true...grace?”

Kaoru-san must not have asked further because of all my bodyguards and maids lurking around me. I had already been asked for pictures by more than ten tourists, but my attendants politely rejected them every time.

“...”

Hotaru-chan was silently enjoying her tea like Zashiki Warashi, even more than I was, but she was supposedly capable of mutual understanding simply by reading the mood in the air. Just by being nearby, Kaoru-san and I could feel her aura drift our way. That was why I kept the conversation between myself and Kaoru-san.

“I’m really looking forward to Ginkaku-ji next.”

“I think they’re holding a special opening. Is there anything in particular you want to see?”

“Tougudou. I thought I should go there at least once, since I’m a tea lover.”

Doujinsai was a place inside of Tougudou at Ginkaku-ji said to be the origin of the four-and-a-half tatami mat room. As a member of a noble family, I at least knew the bare minimum about tea ceremonies, but Kaoru-san was even more passionate about them than me. They also did incense ceremonies there.

“Hey! What are you doing drinking tea over there?! Let’s go drink water from Otowa Waterfall!”

Asuka-chan arrived in the middle of our mellow moment together. She had Takahashi-san and Kurimori-san behind her, and the large bags of souvenirs in their hands told tales of their victory in battle.

“Then shouldn’t we all go see Otowa Waterfall?”

“Yeah!” girlish voices cried in unison.

Hotaru-chan didn’t make a peep at times like this either, but she was sure to raise her hands when the rest of the girls did.

Which stream we chose to drink from will remain a secret.

The official name of Ginkaku-ji was Jishou-ji. Ashikaga Yoshimasa had it built as an imitation of Kinkakuji, but now a proposal to remodel it was under consideration.

“The Onin War was fought by the families in line to succeed the shogun, which then drew in the disputes between daimyo families, and the influential Hosokawas and Yamanas...” Eiichi-kun muttered to himself while listening to the guide’s explanation.

“So the Onin War was the cause, then?”

Yuujirou-kun, whose family connections meant he had to know a lot about this topic, reacted right away.

It seemed wrong that his explanation was so much more interesting than the guide’s boring attempt.

“The shogunate was the cause of the war in the first place. The family strife was just what kicked it off, but there was a lot more history behind it.”

“How far back do you have to go?” Mitsuya-kun asked, poking fun at him.

“You have to understand the Muromachi shogunate to understand the Onin War, and to understand the Muromachi shogunate you have to understand the Northern and Southern dynasties, and to understand those you have to understand the Kamakura shogunate, and to understand the Kamakura shogunate you have to understand the Genji and Heike clans...”

I took the opportunity to stop him there. The point was that history was a series of links in the chain of the past.

“To understand the Genji and Heike clans, you have to understand the shouen... It probably all comes down to the Battle of Baekgang.”

As we discussed this, we took in the sight of Togu-do, which had been opened just for us. This was the building they left behind after years of killing and being killed. As their descendants, we now belonged to one of the world’s economic superpowers. What were we going to leave behind?

With those thoughts in our minds, the first day of our field trip came to an end.

Of course, we had Kyoto kaiseki and shabu-shabu for dinner. Between the meal and the after-dinner ice cream, we went to bed that night in a state of total satisfaction.

I woke up at 6 a.m., changed out of my pajamas, and went to relax in the lobby. I made sure that the public knew about my love for grape juice, so all the Keika Hotels in the nation provided both grape-and orange-juice dispensers. Personally, I felt these hotels were better than the rest.

The TV was playing an economic news channel. Watching something like this in the morning felt better than hearing about celebrity scandals or murder cases. The problem was that I was looking at a visceral economic monster, but that could be ignored.

“Turmoil related to high-tech stocks continues in the American markets. General Energy Online has come under fire for its accounting fraud scandal, and recent reports link the company to the prolonging of the massive California blackout, drawing anger from the electorate. Talks of selling to a rival firm are reportedly unstable...”

I’d known it was coming, but I didn’t want to see a news story like this right

off the bat.

The next story almost made me wish for one about a celebrity scandal or a murder case.

“The battle of offense and defense in Afghanistan has moved to the capital of Kabul, and the final stronghold of Salang Pass is now the site of intense battles between the northern alliance and armed insurgents. Multinational forces are supporting the alliance with aerial strikes. PR officers for these forces have announced that the northern alliance has freed Herat, one of the three largest cities in Afghanistan, and increased air bombings along Khyber Pass in hopes of hindering coordination along the insurgents’ supply chain...”

Afghanistan could now safely be left alone. That made me think of another matter, so I shook my head slightly and struck up a conversation with Angela, who was sitting next to me.

“Angela, I want you to research current-value accounting in America and its regulations. This is probably going to be used as an opportunity to pass some sort of law in Japan too.”

“Very well.”

The defiance of globalization by disposing of bad loans had caused a delay in current-value accounting, but the influence of its proponents, particularly in the IT industry, was growing stronger. They had been relying on Minister Takenaga, and pressure was only increasing after the bursting of the IT bubble.

“I’ve got a question. What’s this current-value accounting thing, Runa-chan?”

Asuna-chan arrived in the lobby, her slippers pitter-pattering on the floor. She looked extremely tired. I wasn’t sure if her blood pressure was low or if she simply hadn’t slept enough. Well, this kind of conversation was probably safe for her to overhear.

“It’s a new way of making money without any cash.”

“What? Really? That’s hard to believe.”

Asuna-chan laughed, thinking I was joking, but that truly was the gist of it. Grade-schoolers throughout the world never needed to trouble themselves with things like current-value accounting.

“I always think this whenever we talk, Runa-chan, but you’re really not normal. You’re a genius. I’m proud to be your friend, but it’s okay to be more like a normal girl.”

“What have you been thinking I am, exactly?”

I played along with her joke. However, she was a member of high society too. She had the right type of background that an ordinary person wouldn’t.

“When Father found out you were friends with Izumikawa-kun, he was so happy to have a connection to the deputy prime minister. Nagata-cho isn’t the nicest place.”

“Ah, I see. Your father is at the minister’s age.”

“Correct. He’s a second-generation Diet member, after all. It’s a bit early, but his district is rushing things so that he can produce better results. He’s really grateful for the Shikoku Shinkansen you built.”

“So that’s why I got all those citrus fruits as a present.”

The warm region of the Seto Inland Sea was Asuna-chan’s homeland and electoral district. She gifted many of the mandarins and citrus fruits that grew there this time of year to others, earning her the nickname “Orange Asuna.”

Every last classmate of hers ended up eating mandarins.

“Then is he interested in extending the Shikoku Shinkansen?”

“I think so. I told him to ask you, so he’ll probably come to kneel to you.”

Asuna-chan was smiling, but there was no contempt in her words. She respected the fact that her father was willing to bow down to someone for the sake of their hometown. I didn’t dislike the parent-child relationship those two shared.

“♪”

“!!”

Asuna-chan and I both jumped when we felt a tap on our shoulders. We turned around to find Hotaru-chan there with a smile that said “Good morning.” As always, we could tell what she wanted to say even when she didn’t say it out loud.

Even Angela was startled. *She didn’t notice her either...?*

“Ah, so it’s time for breakfast? Keikain-san, let’s go to the dining room!”

“Yes, let’s get going.”

On our way there, Angela whispered in my ear. She kept her eyes fixed permanently on Hotaru-chan, who was walking in front of me.

“My lady, are you sure that girl is human?”

“She has legs, doesn’t she? Or are you saying she appeared out of nowhere while an ex-CIA agent was on guard duty?!”

I was quite sure that Hotaru-chan could hear our whispered conversation from behind.

Breakfast was a buffet with both Japanese and Western options.

I picked out rice, clam miso soup, cooked salmon filets, pickled plums, pickled radishes, and nori. Everyone’s eyes were digging into me painfully while I ate my Japanese breakfast with chopsticks.

“Despite the way she looks, Runa can eat Japanese food so beautifully for a foreigner...”

I had no choice but to smile awkwardly at Eiichi-kun’s strange words to go along with him, or perhaps to retort back. I couldn’t exactly change how I looked, and people like Eiichi-kun cared more about what was on the inside than the outside. He was having toast with eggs, bacon, salad, and a morning coffee for breakfast. I sipped on green tea after the meal. Everyone put their hands together to express their gratitude.

“Thank you for the food.”

We took the Nara line from Kyoto Station to reach Fushimi Inari Shrine.

However, we had to leave in groups of three on standard trains since there was not enough room for larger parties.

Angela had insisted that this was unsafe, but I managed to convince her by having guards from the Kyoto Metropolitan Police support us on all fronts. I left the hotel with the last group, and... *What's this, Hotaru-chan? She's handing me some kind of bamboo wrapping.* Her face looked like she wanted me to hold onto it, so I took it with me as we headed out of the hotel.

Later, I learned that it was inarizushi she'd asked the hotel kitchen to make. It was the perfect thing for our destination.

"Are you going on a mountain pilgrimage, Keikain-san?" asked Kurimori-san.

She was usually the one to strike up conversations when all the girls were together. A conversation was a perfect way to gather personal information, so Kurimori-san must have been trying to learn more about me in order to win my favor.

The Kurimori zaibatsu began as merchants during the Edo period in a coastal town in Niigata prefecture, eventually building a fortune on the American markets and expanding into the maritime, agriculture, and fishing industries. The bubble left them with major burns that nearly led to their destruction, but as Ichijou put it...

"Burns aren't fatal wounds. The food industry, including fishing, is the backbone of the business world and comes with stability. It's also appealing because fresh seafood can reliably be procured from the Sea of Japan. Their overinvestment in real estate is what's putting the pressure on, so if they handle that, then they can get back on their feet."

And so, they were saved by the opportunity to be the exclusive provider of seafood and processed foods for Teisei Department Stores.

It was a big deal that the bubble wasn't as fatal as it had been in my past life, as was the fact that I had enough resources left to offer a lifeline to the Kurimori zaibatsu. This history was why Kurimori-san couldn't act as an equal around me. I still wished that she could treat me more casually like a friend, since we were the same age.

“Well, I do have a plan for what to do this morning at Fushimi Inari.”

We entered Kyoto Station and walked up to the Nara line platform together. There were four trains heading to our destination every hour, so the group that had already left was probably beginning their visit to Fushimi Inari by now.

“Ah, the rapid train is leaving! Shouldn’t we hurry?!”

Akiko-san was looking at the display board and shouting, but there was no real need to rush. In fact, the rapid train didn’t stop at our destination of Inari Station. The Nara line trains left at a rate of six per hour if you included this rapid train.

Akiko-san turned red when she heard that explanation. She could be panicky and careless, but that just made her something of a pet in our group’s conversations.

“I’ve lived in Tokyo for a long time now, but it’s still hard to believe that so many trains run all the time like this.”

The station in Asuna-chan’s hometown only ran one train an hour. Well, it was a single-track limited express railway, but there were apparently one or two regular trains that stopped there at a leisurely pace. She couldn’t believe it when she first came to Tokyo and saw the trains come in one after another.

We departed Kyoto Station and arrived at Inari Station. The train had been quite full of passengers, but we made it without any problems and reached our destination of Fushimi Inari.

“We’ll start by praying at the main temple and then take a group photo.”

“...”

I silently got Angela’s attention during the group picture after the prayer.

She understood why and explained the situation.

“I requested the services of a local cameraman!”

“Then why is *that* here?!”

The photographer was now reduced to being called “that.” When he was interrogated...ahem, when he was *questioned* after taking the picture, he

explained that he couldn't let this juicy opportunity get away and forced his way into the event.

It appeared that the local cameraman was a fan of the photographer, so he was eager and happy to help him out. Yes, I would have to pretend I hadn't seen them.

Fushimi Inari Shrine had a long history that went all the way back to the Nara period. It was the main temple of all Inari worshippers throughout the country, home to a god of prosperous businesses. The rows of torii gates, which began as thanks for the prayers and fulfillment granted by the shrine, were a brilliant sight that made for a popular tourist attraction to this day. Visiting each of the grounds on Mount Inari was called a mountain pilgrimage. This took about two hours, so I had set aside all my morning plans to be sure I was successful. That was how personally excited I was to visit this place.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, I found myself standing alone inside the torii gates. *Where is everyone? Where are my guards? Let me try to remember. We all prayed at Kumatakasha in front of Kodamaga Pond, then I felt like I heard an echo, turned around, and ended up here.*

What kind of fantasy story is this?

However, as someone reincarnated into an otome game world, maybe I had no business asking that question.

I was enjoying the situation. Thinking about it, I realized I always had people with me wherever I walked, and it had been so long since I'd been able to walk alone like this. I strolled through the gates and hummed a little tune to myself. Then, despite the blue sky, I felt a raindrop strike my face. It was a sun shower, a phenomenon also called the "fox's wedding." I looked behind me and saw a bride in a white kimono heading for the peak of the mountain. She wore a fox mask, but removed it once she reached me.

The woman was me as an adult. Wearing a white kimono instead of a wedding dress gave her a docile look. The adult me in the kimono smiled softly at my grade-schooler self, then passed me by and continued.

I suddenly noticed something. There was a groom up ahead of her. I tried to crane my head to see who it was, but then I realized that I couldn't move my body.

“Runa?!”

Eiichi-kun's voice snapped me back to my senses. Instead of the torii gates, I was standing at Ichinomine, the mountain peak. Eiichi-kun approached me and called out to the others. According to Angela and my guards, who raced toward me in a panic, I'd apparently disappeared as soon as they took their eyes off me.

“It looks like the fox spirit here invited me off somewhere.”

My reassurance made the faces of the Japanese group members turn pale.

“Yeah, that could happen here.”

“I can't believe you made it out okay...”

“*Na man da bu na man da bu...*”

“Uh, that doesn't apply here, does it?”

The situation ended with a confirmation of the paranormal. Of course, it wasn't confirmed for *everyone*.

“I don't believe in the occult. It's the twenty-first century...but how did they manage to kidnap you and get you all the way up there? Sleeping gas...?”

Angela didn't stop muttering under her breath until we left Fushimi Inari. As I was looking at her, I felt something strange in the pocket of my school uniform. I touched the outside and realized that the bamboo wrap inside had transformed into something round.

I took it out to find a single transparent Cintamani stone.

“Aren't you glad you carried it with you?”

Huh?! I haven't heard Hotaru-chan's voice in so long.

For lunch, we were given vegetarian meals that included boiled tofu. It was probably a bit of a light meal for us growing grade-schoolers, but we would just

have to eat snacks to tide us over. Our first destination on the second afternoon of the trip was Nijo Castle, but everyone was a little underwhelmed by this, especially those from noble families.



“Why shouldn’t we be here? It’s the center of the Bakumatsu period, and we’re the descendants of that fight between friends and foes.”

I clapped my hands, agreeing with Kaoru-san’s retort. Nobles included military and court noble families as well as elder statesmen from the Meiji Restoration, so if you traced back your lineage, you would have to be either a friend or a foe here in Kyoto.

The Keikains were an official family created as burgeoning nobility to be Showa statesmen, but as far as blood went, we were a family of statesmen from the Meiji Restoration, giving us a different past than the daimyo noble families. It was always good to be reminded that one couldn’t choose one’s own parents.

In a way, the Asagiri Marquessate were the victors, as the Iwazaki zaibatsu sought their court-noble blood and supported their lifestyle while most court noble families lived in poverty.

“?”

“It’s nothing, Hotaru-chan.”

The Kaihouins were one example of those impoverished court nobles, but they managed to maintain their family because they were descended from sorcerers. After the Meiji Restoration’s abolishment of Buddhism, they supposedly adhered to Shintoism, but before then they operated the interesting family business of banishing vengeful spirits.

Between our games of hide and seek in kindergarten and this most recent development, they were a very mysterious family.

But besides that...

“I haven’t heard your voice in so long, Kaihouin-san.”

“Oh, you’re lucky, Keikain-san. They say you’ll have good fortune on a day when you hear her speaking,” explained Takahashi-san.

It was an amusing legend that had sprung up, not that I had any right to say such a thing. Asuna-chan had a funny look on her face as well.

Kinkakuji also had the official name of Rokuonji. This lavish temple was built

by Ashikaga Yoshimatsu, the third shogun of the Muromachi period, then burned down at the start of the Showa era. Now it remained at our fingertips in the form of literature.

“I wonder why they burned Kinkakuji?”

When I murmured my thoughts out loud as I gazed at the temple, Mitsuya-kun joined in on the conversation. Kinkakuji continued to reveal its eternal golden figure to us.

“Probably because it touched eternity?”

I knew this was a metaphor that came from a certain work of literature. It was a classic, but not something that grade-schoolers should be reading yet, so we knew we should continue speaking figuratively.

“This world continues to go through change. With it changes justice, evil, beauty, ugliness, and everything else. But this lone temple before me now fills me with feelings of eternity. That must have been why the man burned this temple.”

“I think I understand, but reading that book made me feel something. I wanted to smoke a cigarette.”

“Hey, you’re in elementary school. But I get it.”

“Right?”

Mitsuya-kun and I laughed together. It was our own little secret. With that, we left for our next destination.

I gazed at Ryoanji’s stone garden as I listened to the tour guide’s description.

“But no matter how you look at the stones in this garden, there’s always one you can’t see...”

Yuujirou-kun stood with his arms crossed. I asked him what was on his mind, since he seemed to be thinking about something, and he gave me this answer:

“‘To know when one has enough.’ But what makes it enough?”

That was what Yuujirou-kun was pondering as he stared at the unseen rocks. I put a bit of distance between us.

From this position, I could see the rocks that Yuujirou-kun couldn't.

"If you can't see them on your own, then what if we look together?"

He started to laugh at my remark. It came out much louder than usual for him.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! That's so like you, Keikain-san. I never thought of doing it that way."

I laughed too when I saw him like that. I pointed at the rocks he couldn't see to tell him where they were, and he did the same for me.

Ninna-ji was home to Omuro, which had its own eighty-eight sacred grounds and was designed for people who couldn't make the Shikoku Pilgrimage. Holy grounds like these were scattered all over the country, proving how popular pilgrimages had come to be.

"Runa, did you make it to all eighty-eight spots?"

"I traveled from number one all the way to eighty-eight."

I gave a big, satisfied smile to Eiichi-kun, and I wasn't technically lying. I'd just gone from Ryosenji, the first temple, straight to the eighty-eighth temple of Ookuboji. The Tokyo to Takamatsu overnight bus had left me drained of all motivation after just those two. As for how delicious the udon I ate later was... no, I'll get back on topic. If you were to properly pray or make a donation at every single temple, it could take anywhere from ten days to half a month, or even a full month at a more reasonable pace.

"We won't be able to see everything here. It's supposed to take two hours."

"Yeah, that's not going to work."

Ninna-ji had other points of interest, such as the sight of its famous cherry blossoms. I was so disappointed that we were there in the wrong season.

"I think this place is famous for its Omuro school of flower arrangement."

"Have you ever arranged flowers, Runa?"

"Just a little, like with tea ceremonies."

We passed through the central gates of Miedo and returned to the temple

gates. The sun was beginning to set, bathing the five-story pagoda in an elegant light.

“That reminds me, they’re supposed to have four-leaf clover charms here. Shouldn’t you get one of those?”

“How come?”

I cocked my head at Eiichi-kun’s suggestion and he let out a deliberate sigh, slumping his shoulders.

“Did you already forget about what happened at Fushimi Inari?”

“Ah...”

It probably wouldn’t help to tell him that the whole thing was a pleasant experience. The truth was that I’d basically been abducted, and Angela, Eiichi-kun, and all the others must have been so scared when they were looking for me.

“Good idea. I’ll buy one.”

I bought two four-leaf clover protective charms from the souvenir shop and gave one to Eiichi-kun.

“Here. This is to thank you for worrying about me.”

“...Thanks.”

He looked off to the side as he accepted the charm, maybe because it made him feel shy.

He ended up keeping his charm attached to the strap of his PHS, just like I did.

“Excuse me, are you Keikain Runa-san? Can I please have your autograph?!”

Arashiyama was just as big of a tourist spot as Kiyomizu-dera, but my one miscalculation was how much *physically* bigger of a tourist spot it was than Kiyomizu-dera. The result was a high rate of clashes with other students on field trips and sightseers with no good way to escape or reject them.

On top of that, I had become somewhat famous due to my ad campaign for Teisei Department Stores and my opera debut. The result was a girl my age slipping past the eyes of Angela and my guards and presenting me with a paper

for an autograph.

“I’m sorry. You have wrong person...”

I tried to deceive her with broken Japanese, but my willpower was broken by, of all things, the Arashiyama souvenir shop. Every last piece of merchandise using my face without my permission ended up crushed to bits.

Angela was furious, of course, but when the girl told her that there was also merchandise of me in arcade crane games, her fury turned to astonishment.

“Naniwa merchants can be so tough...”

With that unnecessary remark, the souvenir shop man ended up pleading to Angela as she questioned him. I also ended up having to give my autograph. This meant that the other Japanese people came up to ask for autographs too, and I ended up signing things for a hundred girls in total.

“Haven’t you noticed? You’re seen as a fashion icon for girls your age. I see a modeling debut on the horizon.”

The photographer’s explanation, given as he took my picture, was ludicrous.

A few days later, my unauthorized merchandise would be fully wiped out from every Japanese arcade. It went without saying that the fools who made them received quite a scolding from Angela.

We could do as we pleased on the third day of the field trip, but most people wanted to group up and go on optional tours instead of wandering around aimlessly by themselves.

The most popular options were to head south to Nara and do a sightseeing tour of Byodoin Hououdo, Yakushiji, and Toudaiji, or to explore at Eigamura and the railroad museum. It was a bit far away, but another option was to see the Takarazuka Revue. We could even choose to go shopping on Kawaramachi Street or around Kyoto Station.

“What do you want to do, Runa?” Eiichi-kun asked my opinion on the second night, so I told him my plans.

I watched the question mark form over his head when he heard my destinations.

“I’m going to the Expo ’70 Commemorative Park, then leaving from Kansai International Airport to have dinner in Kobe’s Chinatown.”

When the third day of the field trip arrived, many people turned up to join my strange tour. There was the usual Quartet, as well as Kaoru-san, Kurimori-san, Kazuki Shiori-san, and Machiyoi Sanae-san.

We started by boarding the shinkansen at Kyoto Station and heading for Shin-Osaka Station. From there, we took the cars prepared for us and headed to the Expo ’70 Commemorative Park. I’d considered having us drive all the way there from our starting point, but Kyoto was a tough place to drive until you got on the freeway.

“This must be because of that one movie...”

Mitsuya-kun had a strained smile on his face, but I didn’t mind it. I just shared my thoughts on the movie.

“I love that organization and what they believe.”

It was a mere anime movie, but so beloved that even parents who went with their children ended up weeping. The day before, our teacher had watched it at a screening and cried more than the children. This was one of the settings of that movie, with an interesting backstory. That was why I wanted to see it.

“You even love the song and singer who ended up with that organization?”

I puffed up my chest proudly in response to Yuujirou-kun’s question. We were in the luxury section of the Shin-Sakaide-bound shinkansen.

“Of course I do! I even memorized the song.”

“That’s so wonderful,” Kurimori-san remarked.

Kazuki Shiori-san eyed me indifferently before speaking next.

“I understand why you want to go to the park, but why Kansai International Airport?”

From the park we would return to Shin-Osaka Station by car, then board the limited express bound for Kansai International Airport. Osaka also had a movie studio and aquarium, though. There was everything from a shopping district to places like Osaka Castle and Tsutenkaku. I understood why the airport was

confusing to them.

“It’s a bit of a business trip too. I’m going to attend a photo shoot for our airline company.”

I had in fact prepared a suitable event as an excuse, but the truth was different.

In the game, there was a single image of me leaving Kansai International Airport on some sort of journey after my downfall.

I imagined I was headed overseas, but instead of Narita or Haneda, I departed from none other than Kansai International Airport. It probably didn’t mean anything, but I just felt like I wanted to see it. There was nothing more to it than that.

I was surprised to be greeted by so many higher-ups when we arrived at Shin-Osaka Station, but I figured it out when I looked at the platform—it was a Keika one.

“You sure can be strangely obsessive about the past, Runa-san.”

Kaoru-san made that casual remark to me in our first-class seats on the way to Kansai International Airport after we left the park. Our takoyaki and okonomiyaki were steaming on the table in front of our seats, but since we’d reserved the whole car, we didn’t have to worry about bothering anyone. I replied to her just as casually between bites of takoyaki.

“You think so?”

“I do. I thought something was wrong when you started singing at the park, and I didn’t know what to do when your voice was so impressive that birds started showing up.”

In a way, that made sense for the songs I sang, but it infuriated me to think that I’d ended up giving that photographer another great picture. I swallowed down my anger along with the piping hot takoyaki. *Gulp.*

“I already knew those songs, but they sounded so lovely when you sang them. I can tell you channel your emotions into song. Are you planning to become a diva someday?”

Machiyoi Sanae-san, Kaoru-san's friend, seemed envious when she joined the conversation. She was the only one who understood my impromptu songs.

"Who knows? I won't deny that I've already received offers from Europe."

"That's wonderful! I'm sure you'd make a lovely diva, Keikain-san."

Just as I was about to respond, I heard a cry that I couldn't ignore.

"Augh! Mitsuya, don't cover all of it with mayo!"

"This is the ultimate way of enjoying this kind of food, Teia. Just eat it."

Okay, okay. That's definitely a declaration of war against me.

"Hang on just a minute! Katsuobushi and nori are the best toppings!"

We quickly passed the hour it took to reach our destination with little topics like this. That hour turned into a little more because the train was late, though. Well, that's what you get with the Hanwa line.

The still image remained vivid in my mind. You could see the back of a young girl standing all alone in the departure lounge of the Kansai International Airport. She only had one bag with her, and I remembered how striking it was to see her standing in line. I wondered where she went in the end.

"Runa?"

"Hm? What is it, Eiichi-kun?"

I turned back toward Eiichi-kun when he brought me back to reality. I felt like I was putting a natural smile on my face, but he looked at me suspiciously.

"You're acting weird today."

"I am? Maybe the trip is making me a bit sentimental."

"You're the last person who would feel like that."

"Okay, I get it. This is war. Do you want a war?"

I raised my fist, prompting Eiichi-kun to surrender and smile. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Now you're back to the usual Runa."

“Sure. Thanks, Eiichi-kun. I’m going to head out to the photo shoot.”

This event was a pilgrimage campaign, and the photographer went into a fit of laughter at the mismatched sight of a blonde girl wearing traditional pilgrimage clothes. This angered me, so I ordered everyone to put on the same outfits and we ended up taking pilgrimage photos at the airport that wasn’t even in Shikoku. I could see myself being invited to Shikoku very soon...

We took a high-speed vessel from the airport to Kobe. The sun was starting to set already, and after we arrived in Kobe and had our dinner in Chinatown, the plan was to return to Kyoto on the shinkansen out of Shin-Kobe. One particularly unusual structure was being built in Osaka Bay, where the land reclamation was still underway.

“An ark city. It looks like they’re finally starting construction.”

“Ark city?” Kaoru-san questioned me about my quiet musings. This world was starting to change, little by little. Those changes were taking shape plain as day here in Osaka Bay.

“It’s an offshore platform for former citizens of Northern Japan to live. They’ve been getting rejected when they try to live on the mainland, so they decided to build their own city instead. Instead of reclaiming land, they can move the platform because it’s made up of tankers. That way they can move if they really have to.”

The second-class citizens who would live here were the elites within that class. This ark town was a step toward being able to relocate to the mainland. The master plan of the assimilated Northern Japanese citizens was to move from the boathouses and slums on the water to the lower tiers of the ark city, then to the higher tiers, and eventually to new residential developments on the mainland.

But I didn’t want to think about that, so I casually began to sing.

Everyone listened closely to my song. As soon as I was done, applause erupted spontaneously.

“You really sing so sadly about the past, Runa, but I like that about you. What was that song called again?”

I smiled and gave him the name of the secret society from the anime movie we'd watched the previous day. For dinner, we had mapo tofu (not very spicy), shumai, fried rice, and ramen.

Glossary and notes

“Feel free to praise me some more if you want!”: From *Kantai Collection*.

Woman on train who hands out frogs and missions-to-transport letters: *Mahou Sensei Negima!* by Akamatsu Ken, Kodansha.

Stand-and-eat soba: After searching for the line between Kansai-style and Kanto-style broth on a *Seishun 18 no Kippu* journey, I found that the cutoff was between Maibara and Ogaki.

Incense ceremony: The art of appreciating scents. They call it “listening to” the incense instead of “smelling” or “sniffing” it.

Otowa Waterfall: The benefits include academic success, romantic fulfillment, and longevity, but you can only drink for one of them.

California energy blackout: Occurred in the summer of 2000. One of the indirect causes of the downfall of Enron.

Regulation of current-value accounting: The SOX Act. Its official name was the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. The United States names its laws after members of Congress as a way of displaying their achievements. This act was made to protect against accounting fraud, but it still didn't work for Lehman Brothers.

Minister's age: When a House of Representatives member of the ruling party is elected five times in Japan, it's called the "minister's age." Becoming a cabinet minister makes you more prestigious in your hometown, which becomes an advantage in your elections. I hear that the reputation of a minister doesn't help much in single-member constituencies. However, if the current minister fails to be reelected, it damages the ruling administration, so the minister is given a simultaneous physical exam and a check of their constituency.

Cintamani stone: The guardian foxes at Fushimi Inari Shrine carry four things in their mouths: an ear of rice, a scroll, a key, and a Cintamani stone. Rice for abundant crops, a scroll for wisdom, a key to learn about the spirits of the dead and also representing financial luck as the key to the treasury, and a Cintamani stone as a symbol of Inari's virtue.

Mishima Yukio's The Temple of the Golden Pavilion: This book is a bit too difficult for a grade-schooler to read, but it's acclaimed as Mishima Yukio's masterpiece.

The eighty-eight sacred grounds: Named after the Shikoku Pilgrimage of eighty-eight temples. There are local grounds which have also built their own eighty-eight spots. They come in a huge variety of sizes, so you can tell just how big this act of religious devotion became.

Merch that ignores portrait rights: Those who sell this merch are most likely involved with self-employed individuals whose business starts with a "ya."

The anime movie: *Crayon Shin-chan The Movie: The Adult Empire Strikes Back*. A work that's famous as one of Crayon Shin-chan's movie masterpieces.

Runa's songs in this chapter: "Yesterday Once More" and "(They Long to Be) Close to You" by The Carpenters.

That's what you get with the Hanwa line: "Not Hanwa again!" is a common phrase because their trains are infamous for being late. They've been improving in this area lately.

Chapter 11:

When the Lady Is Away...

AFTER A CERTAIN SCHOOL TRIP...or rather, after a certain young lady went on her field trip, Tokyo remained in a state of anxiety over the terrorist attacks.

“This is a report from the Metropolitan Police Department. Today at 7 a.m., the police will be conducting a thorough investigation into the failed terrorist attack on the Shinjuku Geofront. All related parties must remain alert.”

Though the Kudanshita police station didn’t seem to be related to this case, the officers were remaining incredibly vigilant.

Inspector Ono Kenichi, the head of this station, yawned as he listened to the report.

“Inspector, they’ve sent us a gift.”

“Oh? Just turn it down, as usual.”

Giving gifts to public servants could cause problems, so the rules were to refuse them like this.

However, “they” were none other than Kitakaba Security, who were presumptive government workers themselves, although the law hadn’t progressed enough to address such a situation yet. They didn’t want to get in trouble either, so the gifts usually were things like canned coffee. The officers were used to turning them down with excuses like “You don’t want to carry all that home with you, do you? Go ahead and ‘dispose’ of it over here” on a daily basis.

“So? Did they seem nervous?”

“Of course. The young lady was spirited away, so they’re apparently reviewing their security arrangements. They even made Inspector Natsume write his very first apology letter.”

“Poor guy.”

Inspector Ono smiled wryly as he spoke with the lower-ranking officer. He was no longer a non-career worker climbing the ranks to retirement as an assistant inspector, and this was due to the owner of the new skyscraper in Kudanshita as well as this year’s changes in the law. Bodyguards, bounty hunters, and detectives were now becoming subcontractors of the police, and there was a high demand for inspectors who could oversee them. That was why he decided to take the exam, ended up passing, and found himself in the position of opening gifted coffee cans as the new head of the Kudanshita police station.

It was likely also due to the help of Director Maefuji Shouichi, a man he got along with and a drinking buddy to this day.

His connections with Director Maefuji meant that he was generally in charge of giving orders to the many Kitakaba Security members who were here to safeguard Keikain Runa. She owned Kudanshita Keika Tower, the skyscraper in front of the police station. Four units of bodyguards alone were taking turns defending the building, armed maids were there as a platoon of their own, and the skyscraper was also the Tokyo branch office of Kitakaba Security, forming an even larger unit in that one area. As the leader of such a mass of personnel, Inspector Ono’s presence was a significant one.

If he managed to succeed in this position, his goal was to be promoted to superintendent and then deputy chief of police before retirement. Chief of police was on the table too, so long as he remained diligent, but Inspector Ono didn’t feel like overworking himself to that extent.

“All right, let’s get to work. Our jurisdiction doesn’t let us meddle in the investigation, but we need everyone on guard in the name of preventing terrorism. Increase the number of patrolmen. When Kitakaba sends their proposal, we’ll be grateful to accept it.”

The terrorist plot against the Shinjuku Geofront was discovered, and the resulting large-scale investigation was mostly made possible by the massive increase in manpower.

Security companies in particular employed hackers—calling them detectives

—who gathered information about anti-government organizations, leading to the discovery of the terrorist plot. Of course, the opposing party raised a fuss about the supposed hacking they were victims of, but the world wasn't looking at terrorism with any mercy.

I hear Maefuji is involved in this investigation. He must have chosen his strategy while the young lady was gone. She's an incredibly powerful person...

Inspector Ono knew that there were two sides to everything the young lady did in her career, but he never saw her as such a major player. In fact, the first person to show up with a gift and leave dejected was that very girl.

The present she'd brought was a housewarming gift in the form of soba. This arrangement wasn't quite right, but it was the inspector's job to watch out for her.

"As for who to keep an eye on, I want you watching the anti-government groups who plotted this terrorist attack, violent leftist extremist organizations, the right wing, and radical new religions at all times. The officers investigating violent gangs will also join us on this. Since we're casting a wide net, don't forget to hand out photos of suspects if you're out guarding the train station."

Surprisingly, my investigation might be the main one after all...

That was the scent picked up by Inspector Ono, the man focused solely on the scene of the crime.

At this point, the post-bubble cleanup ruling of breach of trust against proprietors had already been decided, and the gentlemen of the bubble's darkness were fading from view.

It wasn't like they needed to go to all the trouble of building offshore towns in the first place. They could have used failed resorts or housing developments at a much lower price, yet the government went with the offshore towns anyway.

Besides, that girl is pouring money into the railway industry in places where it's a mess of land bordering land. The centerpiece of the Shinjuku Geofront is the Keika Railway-sponsored Shinjuku Shinkansen. Keika Holdings was saved after getting out from under a lot of bad debts, but those debts were the result of land flipping and involved many violent gangs. The businessmen and

politicians connected to Keika may have been shadily cleaning things up so that the girl could take over.

Inspector Ono's instincts weren't far off. The investigation led Keika Holdings to provide information about money laundering, and Keika Railway filed a claim against the land flipping they'd experienced as part of the Shinjuku Geofront.

Keikain Runa, who was currently on a field trip, knew none of this.

"Also..."

Inspector Ono trailed off there. Once he managed to shake off the painful memories of his time as an officer, he continued.

"Only traces remain of the imperial police who caused the Second February 26 Incident. They're our target. Don't let the JSDF get away with our prey again!"

The Second February 26 Incident was the greatest shame in police history. Even the JSDF had needed to get involved to ensure public safety.

After the 1995 terrorist attack by the religious cult, the police rushed to create counterterrorism units, but obtaining PMCs in the form of security companies left the police with a dilemma.

What if the PMCs also became the imperial police? They had to closely watch the movements of the nobles with their unique ability to operate outside of the local law, and the person at the very top turned out to be the girl, Keikain Runa.

The JSDF was also secretly involved in the investigation. The terrorists involved in that fall's failed attack turned out to be working out of a boathouse in a bay district, which meant that the current investigation involved searching similar areas on a large scale. A destroyer warship was even stationed to patrol near Haneda Airport in case anyone tried to escape by boat through Tokyo Bay.

As policemen, they appreciated the help, but it was hard to get past the feelings of jealousy over having their achievements stolen.

"This is a report from the Metropolitan Police Department. They have commenced their search of the bay district and arrested a suspect for interfering with their investigation within the city..."

“I can’t believe I’m sitting here in my chair instead of heading out there for the roundup. It just shows how big I’ve gotten.”

No one was there to listen to Inspector Ono’s opinion of himself.

The investigation resulted in the unrelated arrests of a dozen violent gangs, radical right-and left-wing groups, and religious extremists, as well as the mass confiscation of smuggled goods and drugs, but the most popular item provided to the media was the massive cache of Eastern weapons and ammo found outside a storehouse.

The police were criticized for being unable to arrest the anti-government groups who were suspected of storing it, but they announced that the city cleanup would continue as a large-scale investigation. At the same time, urban deployment restrictions were relaxed, and the housing problem for second-class citizens would have its day in the political spotlight.

Glossary and notes

Gifts, etc.: The best gift to thank police officers with is actually a written letter. I’ve heard that these letters are announced within the station so that they can be properly reviewed.

The inspector’s wall: Inspectors are common characters in police dramas and detective shows, but this is the greatest hurdle and comes with a comparable amount of power. But the number of accepted applicants depends on how many higher-ranking inspectors are retiring. Just like in this story, when there’s a high demand for inspectors, the passing score on the exams is lowered.

Chapter 12:

The Rise and Fall of the Electricity Disruptor

“IT SOUNDS LIKE your father is in some trouble, Eiichi-kun.”

“The same goes for your CEO Ichijou.”

Eiichi-kun and I ended up on this topic while we were relaxing in the library after school. We were discussing the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy that was stirring up the newspapers, specifically about Minister Takenaga’s proposed “big-boned policies.”

Political policies always used to be finalized after budgets were estimated, which gave the Minister of Finance and his department a boost in strength.

But the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy was ensuring that policies were decided first and a budget built around them afterward. The finance officials, who were always chuckling over their ability to push policy to the side, saw their position of power reversed all at once by these big-boned policies.

The Ministry of Economy took the lead on this initiative, shocking the Ministry of Finance by doing so, but that was a story for another time.

“This is what happened to your shinkansen, right?”

“Yes. I’m not sure if I should feel happy or sad.”

The shinkansen, which had always been publicly proclaimed to have its budget covered, ended up on the chopping block of these big-boned policies, turning into a political controversy for Minister Takenaga and the Koizumi administration.

Some complained that they’d made off with all the good parts, while others forgave them and praised their swift decision to give their approval.

At any rate, this administration was good at making the news.

“Here’s the next story...”

“This is why the business world is raising such a fuss.”

I tapped the newspaper. The headline read “Secret Recall of Iwazaki Motors!”

“Covering up a recall is dangerous, though. It could be really bad if a truck’s tire went flying or something.”

“What? A tire?”

“Huh? Am I wrong?”

The article mentioned that there was a secret recall, but not what that recall was. I had just let slip a memory from my past life. Eiichi-kun stood up and cornered me with my back to the wall.

It wasn’t appreciated whatsoever.

“Runa, we’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Yes, so please don’t trap me against a wall.”

“Okay. I’ll let you go if you tell me what you know, so don’t hold back. I’ll tell you everything too. This secret recall from Iwazaki Motors involves their doors and brakes. This is the first I’m hearing about truck tires.”

I see. So that’s what the company was hiding. I deserved some blame for giving up everything I knew when I was forced to stare at the serious expression on Eiichi-kun’s handsome face. Once he heard everything I had to say, he cradled his head in his hands.

“You mean Iwazaki Motors is committing crimes?”

“Right, they’ve been doubling their books and adjusting the data. That’s why this recall is a problem, but since all the departments were most likely doing the same thing, the higher-ups don’t understand that the data is inflated. I’m pretty sure this will be the end of Iwazaki Motors. Why does it bother you, Eiichi-kun?”

“Dad was complaining about them. It sounds like they’re going to go ahead with zaibatsu breakups by taking Iwazaki Motors apart for some good press, but they forced us to merge with them at the same time.”

In other words, the Koizumi administration wanted to destroy Iwazaki Motors as part of its zaibatsu-dismantling efforts, but employment rates would take a big hit if the government went after the automobile industry, which was so vital to the country. It sounded like their scheme was going to involve removing

Iwazaki Motors from the Iwazaki zaibatsu and merging it with Teia Motor Co.

In that case, Ayukawa Motors was the best option in my eyes, but selling out to foreign investors would earn them criticism.

“Inconveniently enough, the main bank can’t prepare emergency funds now because of the merger. Raising the money to consume Iwazaki Motors would mean they’d have to separate from the Futaki zaibatsu.”

Teia Motor Co.’s main bank was Futaki Yodoyabashi Bank. The former Yodoyabashi bank took the initiative, earning the nickname “Cowardly Yodoyabashi” with its super-logical management that cut off funds from Teia Motor Co. when they were dealing with a financial crisis. They even went after them for loan repayments. Teia Motor Co. had never forgotten that grudge.

Now that the bank had become Futaki Yodoyabashi Bank after the bursting of the bubble and economic big bang, they were still in the middle of an apology campaign to Teia Motor Co., which didn’t particularly feel like they wanted to borrow large sums of money from them.

The next local financial institution was Gowa Osan Bank, but the employees from the former Osan Bank were experiencing a political purge, and so their channels were in the process of being destroyed.

The reason Teia Motor Co. was still able to run without any turmoil was clearly that they had focused on steady management after their past financial hardships and saved up enough money to be referred to as “Teia Bank.” They didn’t want to risk their healthy funds on something like Iwazaki Motors.

Besides, if Teia Motor Co. handled things on their own, others would start to question their independence and wonder whether they needed the Futaki zaibatsu at all.

Teia Motor Co. had no intention of separating from the Futaki zaibatsu, with whom they had connections and goodwill, but economics came down to profits in the eyes of Minister Takenaga, not either of the other two factors. He would see this as a crime and Teia Motor Co. would become his next target.

From the perspective of the Keika Group, which was already being targeted, this wasn’t a problem we could ignore.

“I don’t think we can clean up this mess by ourselves. Let’s bring in some adults too.”

Eiichi-kun nodded to my murmured conclusion. He was very much still pinning me to the wall. It wasn’t sexy whatsoever.

“So, who do we call?”

“Your father and Ichijou from my side, for sure. We’ll also have to talk to the Iwazaki zaibatsu, so I’ll go through Kaoru-san to ask for President Iwazaki Yashirou of Mikado Iwazaki Bank.”

Thus, the curtain rose on the capriccio of Iwazaki Motors.

Dodgy dealings in the Japanese political and business worlds were generally enacted in the country’s restaurants. For today’s conversation, we went through Yuujirou-kun to have Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa recommend a restaurant, and he chose the Wise Dragon King’s Palace in Meguro.

Ichijou, Tachibana, Nakamaro-oniisama, and I were there to represent the Keika Group. The Teia representatives were Eiichi-kun and his father, Teia Shuuichi-shi.

Attending as both my own friend and an acquaintance of my brother’s was Asagiri Kaoru-san, and President Iwazaki Yashirou was there to represent the Iwazakis. Yuujirou-kun and Mitsuya-kun were also present as outsiders. Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa was there as a third party too since he’d already sensed the situation in advance.

Everyone was cradling their heads when they heard what I had to say. Eiichi-kun did it for the second time, even though he’d already heard it all before.

“I-Is that true?”

President Iwazaki looked to me for confirmation, but it was Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa who nodded his head. He had already confirmed the story as I spoke.

“I’ve spoken with the MLIT to learn the truth, and apparently Iwazaki Motors has confirmed the data redundancies. You won’t be able to avoid a large-scale

recall, and none of Iwazaki Motors's data is reliable at this time."

"We've had Keika Parts Manufacturing look into it, and they found that there was an unusually large number of items being ordered for Iwazaki Motors dealers. It's possible that these repairs aren't legitimate..."

Tachibana poured salt on all their wounds. A defect meant that repairs would be necessary, but that would require checking on production, which could easily expose the entire deal. So they bought parts from us, an OEM, and had the dealers do repairs so that no one would find out. This was clearly a criminal offense.

On top of that, the repairs also came with things like free oil changes to attract customers. It was hard to even respond to that.

"This is bad. There's no way we can cover this up."

Ichijou looked up at the ceiling. The MLIT was currently furious about this case. The Koizumi administration, which was working to break up the zaibatsu, wouldn't let a chance like this slip away.

"Iwazaki Motors has pledged to improve and requested support from all zaibatsu corporations, but..."

As President Iwazaki was making his weak response, Kaoru-san was the one to deliver the finishing blow.

"If the executives didn't know about what Runa-san is talking about, then that means they're incompetent. If they did and covered it up, then they're guilty, correct?"

I gave a pained smile to Kaoru-san, who was able to be so merciless because she didn't know anything about the situation. Those words alone made President Iwazaki give up on defending the company.

"I want the Iwazaki zaibatsu to provide relief."

"That's not possible. Do you really think the Koizumi administration and Minister Takenaga would let this slide, especially when all the companies of the Iwazaki zaibatsu are so active?"

I flatly rejected President Iwazaki's proposal, which left Nakamaro-oniisama

dumbfounded. Now that I thought about it, this was probably the first time he'd ever seen me put up a fight with such a powerful person.

Getting back on topic, not even the Iwazaki zaibatsu could help fix a cover-up like this one. It was a deep-rooted problem that, when an emergency audit was conducted by the Iwazaki zaibatsu corporations, revealed a hidden mountain of wrongdoings upon wrongdoings.

This had already spiraled into something that the Iwazaki zaibatsu couldn't control internally anymore, and they were unlikely to throw away hundreds of billions of yen just to save the company.

Not that I had any intention of mentioning that now.

"This is bad. Minister Takenaga will definitely hear about this from the MLIT. Once it goes through them and they receive aid for unprofitable businesses, it will be difficult to interfere with the situation anymore."

Shuuichi-shi pressed his hands to his mouth as he thought up future plans. There were already whispers that a restructuring of the automobile industry would be necessary due to the number of companies. Foreign corporations were already casting their shadows on that restructuring.

The METI was currently thinking of strengthening domestic automobile makers, with Teia Motor Co. at the center of the plan, which was why they were considering separating them from the Futaki zaibatsu. Both developments would be strong successes for Minister Takenaga.

"Then can we have Runa-kun's companies take over the separation of Iwazaki Motors? Iwazaki will support you in every way so as not to cause you unnecessary burden."

I immediately rejected President Iwazaki's proposal. "No, that won't do. If that were possible, I would have volunteered to help Ayukawa Motors too."

The four children at the table were shocked to hear me reveal the true story of the Ayukawa Motors bailout. I'm sure they knew that I was wealthy, but they must have been even more dumbfounded to learn that I'd been involved in the bailout of one of Japan's few automobile companies, even if I did end up turning them down.

“It’s incredible to think that, in a different world, Runa could have been our rival.”

I smiled awkwardly at Eiichi-kun’s astonishment. There were all sorts of dishes laid out on the table, but since no one was eating them, I merely gulped down my grape juice.

“That was back during Prime Minister Fuchigami’s administration. Just like then, I think it’s fine for me not to act on Ayukawa. Defying the Koizumi administration is pointless. Instead, why not let him take the credit?”

Somehow, I felt like I was just now understanding the crisis that the Iwazaki zaibatsu had found themselves in.

They’d grown along with national policy, involving themselves in the unification of Northern Japan and dedicating their efforts to business in Karafuto.

The Iwazaki zaibatsu must have been looking for a new money tree to harvest in Karafuto, since their roots were beginning to fester. The group was becoming more rigid due to familial issues and bureaucracy, problems all major zaibatsu tended to struggle with. Iwazaki Corporation continued to invest in gas and oil fields in northern Karafuto, while Iwazaki Heavy Industries held 30 percent of the shares of Karafuto Heavy Industries, which belonged to the semi-public sector.

A different side of this emerged when you considered the Keika Group’s absorption. Not that I had any intention of pointing that out.

“The Koizumi regime gets to dismantle a zaibatsu and the Iwazaki zaibatsu doesn’t have to raise the money to save Iwazaki Motors, which is sacrificed so that the other businesses aren’t affected. The prime minister becomes indebted to Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, and I avoid getting involved in this headache.”

Shuuichi-shi responded to my proposal. “From Teia Motor Co.’s perspective, making Ayukawa shoulder the cost of saving Iwazaki Motors would also let us stay in the Futaki zaibatsu. If Ayukawa got involved with its new foreign capital, could we ask your side to handle the reorganization of subcontractors once the conglomerate has collapsed? Teia would accommodate you for the necessary

parts production.”

This gave me a benefit of my own. Teia Motor Co. was strict on costs, but I had the advantage of a major OEM supplier on my side. It was more of a new connection than a chance to profit.

“Very well. Now it sounds like I won’t have to work for free.”

Everyone laughed at my joke. It was a deal without much profit for me, but the fact that there was *some* benefit made it better.

“As a member of the Iwazaki zaibatsu, I thank you, Runa-kun. With the head of the Teias and Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa as witnesses, I want it known that the Iwazaki zaibatsu owes a debt to the Keika Group in return.”

President Iwazaki bowed his head to me. If Iwazaki Motors was scrapped on the orders of the METI, or more accurately, Minister Takenaga, the rest of the Iwazaki zaibatsu would likely suffer damages too.

By cutting off Iwazaki Motors themselves, the Iwazaki zaibatsu would be seen by the public as a responsible organization, and Minister Takenaga’s involvement would be minimized.

They would also owe the Keika Group for helping them carry out this strategy, causing Imperial Iwazaki Bank to think twice about trying to acquire Keika Holdings.

The Iwazaki zaibatsu’s three major companies were referred to as the “three pillars”: Iwazaki Heavy Industries, Iwazaki Corporation, and Imperial Iwazaki Bank. They were the crown jewels and the unifiers of the “organized Iwazaki.”

Iwazaki Motors fell under the domain of Iwazaki Heavy Industries, so cutting them off might cause some lingering effects between Iwazaki Heavy Industries and Imperial Iwazaki Bank. But Iwazaki Motors was beyond saving now, and between that and the mountain of scandals involving so many of the zaibatsu’s companies, there was no way Iwazaki Corporation could reject the relief package prepared for them.

If any issues did arise, Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa, one of the attendees of this meeting, would surely intervene before Minister Takenaga could say anything.

“I appreciate you giving me something out of this too, but are you sure you’re okay with this, Your Majesty?”

Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa smiled awkwardly as he sought confirmation, but I smiled too and answered that I was.

I couldn’t be honest and say that Iwazaki Motors meant nothing to us with Furukawa Telecoms on the horizon.

“Yes, I’m all right. I’ll lay low for a while as I’ve been in the spotlight due to the Shinjuku Shinkansen.”

“I hope I’ll be able to say things like that when I grow up.”

Mitsuya-kun murmured that to himself, but it came out louder than he expected, making everyone laugh.

Yuujiro-kun’s response to this only increased their laughter.

“Are you sure you want to deal with these kinds of unreasonable requests if you do grow up like her?”

Later, it would be announced that Iwazaki Motors was separating from the Iwazaki zaibatsu and all executives beneath the president had resigned.

Fraud and wrongdoing within other companies under the Iwazaki zaibatsu was also revealed to the public, and these organizations subsequently apologized and reshuffled management roles.

Imperial Iwazaki Bank only provided an emergency loan, and Ayukawa Motors, which wanted to expand overseas while also solidifying its domestic base, acquired Iwazaki Motors. Keika Bank prepared the funds for the purchase.

Keika Parts also purchased the Iwazaki Motors subcontractors who were to be let go, expanding their scope even more. The Koizumi administration and Minister Takenaga of Economic and Fiscal Policy made a big deal about this result of their zaibatsu dismantling, but it never became known that Deputy Prime Minister Izumikawa had worked behind the scenes to make this happen.

“Runa, can I talk to you for a minute?”

Everyone had left in their groups after the discussion ended. Only Nakamaro-oniisama, Kaoru-san, and Tachibana remained.

“What is it, Nakamaro-oniisama?”

“I just want to thank you. Thank you for being peaceful toward the Iwazaki zaibatsu out of duty to the Asagiri family.”

“I’m grateful too, Runa-san,” said Kaoru-san. “Thank you very much for respecting my family and inviting me to attend this meeting.”

Nakamaro-oniisama bowed to me, and Kaoru-san followed suit. Personally, it didn’t feel very peaceful to me, since I’d been able to postpone the Iwazaki zaibatsu’s acquisition of the Keika Group. But those who had been insisting on a takeover must have been gritting their teeth in frustration now.

Professor Kanbe picked up the phone on his desk when it started to ring.

“Hey there, Minister Takenaga. If it isn’t the man of the hour!”

“Give me a break, Professor. At my very best, I’m just a foolish playwright who dances on the stage.”

“Let’s skip all that for now. I wonder what you hope to gain by calling a simple college professor while the world is in such chaos?”

“I was just thinking back to your thesis and I felt like asking you about it. Is there any chance that Keikain Runa of the Keikain Dukedom could be an example of that idea?”

“Indeed. She’s the one great genius who more than outweighs the worth of a million prodigies or a billion commoners.

“But Minister, let me warn you as a researcher. Your boss, the prime minister, is certainly on the same intellectual level as she is. Problems will arise if the two ever end up on separate paths. If both end up ruined, the twenty-first century will look grim for this country. You’re in a position to regulate both the prime minister and the girl. Be sure not to pit them against each other.”

“I’m surprised you’ve seen that far ahead.”

“It would be stranger not to understand that in this day and age. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I appreciate it. I’ll tell the prime minister what you’ve told me. Goodbye, then.”

Professor Kanbe hung up the phone and looked at the newspaper on his desk. The world was in a panic over terrorist organizations, but in Japan, a new political war had quietly begun.

“Some people are starting to behave strangely.”

A while after the Iwazaki Motors bailout made the news, Toudou Nagayoshi visited me with Okazaki Yuuichi and gave me this info.

Okazaki turned the monitor on and showed me a chart. It displayed the crude oil futures market.

“Crude oil has been showing a strong downward trend ever since the terrorist attack. It should only be a matter of time before a barrel of oil drops from the twenty-five- to thirty-dollar range down to twenty dollars.”

“But we’re still making a profit, right?”



They both nodded back to me. The main source of my current profit was the many Russian bonds I bought during their currency crisis and the crude oil they allowed me to pick up cheaply in return.

“Yes, that’s correct. The slump in price is due to the worsening economies around the world in response to the terrorist attacks and a decrease in demand. However, one group on the market appears to be showing strange behavior.”

Okazaki continued to explain. The monitor switched to show data from the past two to three months, and I spotted a familiar name involved in several trades.

“Blackship Energy? Where have I heard that name before?”

As I cocked my head, Toudou gave me the answer.

“They’re one of General Energy Online’s Japanese corporations that sought the liberalization of electricity and energy.”

I clapped my hands together. I had become familiar with General Energy Online through the water business, but I also remembered the fuss when the financial news called them foreign disruptors sailing into our country with their main products: electricity and energy.

“So, what about them? Are they going to buy our crude oil and sell it to Japanese petroleum thermal stations, or construct new stations of their own?”

“No. General Energy Online’s main business is in natural gas and electricity, so they’re butting into our trades.”

I stayed silent. I didn’t understand what Okazaki was saying, so Toudou picked up where his explanation left off.

“As payment for the Russian bonds, we accepted crude oil from the Russian government that was meant to go to Europe. It takes some time to bring that oil over to Japan, so instead, they sell it off on the European crude oil futures market, buy directly from the Middle Eastern oil producers who provide most of Japan’s crude oil, and ship it to Japan in tankers.”

Toudou pulled up a world map on the monitor. Then he showed the tanker shipping routes from the Persian Gulf to Japan in the east and continued his

explanation.

“Since Russia also produces natural gas, they export that to Europe as well. To hedge against risk, they deal in options for natural gas, not crude oil.”

“So natural gas prices don’t decrease when crude oil prices do?”

Toudou nodded in response to my question and explained further.

“It would be more accurate to say that it’s easier to sell in Europe. The prices are stable and crude oil bound for Japan has to be purchased from the Middle East along the way.”

Since it was going to be sold in Europe, they didn’t mind if the purchase price from an oil-producing country was linked to crude oil or gas. Okazaki was the next to continue.

“Deals like these usually involve making contracts to buy crude oil from an oil-producing country equivalent to the amount received from Russia. This allows them to hedge the risk associated with the commodity price.”

Crude oil was sold to Europe in euros. Buying from an oil-producing country required dollars, and once it was brought to Japan and sold there, it finally became yen. Exchange risk occurred each time the money was converted. That was why they formed contracts with Middle Eastern oil-producing countries.

“We’ll hand over the oil going from Russia to Europe, so sell the equivalent and bring it to Japan.”

This eliminated our need to use dollars and euros, greatly decreasing our exchange risk. The oil-producing countries accepted payment in euros too, since their proximity to Europe ensured close relationships with its countries. Also, the euro currency was in demand at this time as it was brand new.

However, the problem was the reduction in profits when the oil came to Japan due to the sinking price.

“Including loading, it takes about one month for oil to go from the Middle East to Japan. In other words, the cash we can convert into yen is the oil price one month out. If it dips below our buying price, we suffer losses. That’s why it’s normal to use money gained from the European oil markets to purchase

crude oil on the Hong Kong or Tokyo markets.”

“I think I understand. Before we can expect a good dice roll in another month, we have to bet on a slightly more expensive one first. So how does it connect?”

Okazaki was the one to answer my question.

“It’s called a ‘round-trip transaction’ in the industry. Multiple companies collude to repeat orders from each other and create fake sales. We think the natural gas we purchased is being used in that process.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I told you already that some companies have been acting strangely. General Energy Online is one of them.”

“The first thing they’re doing is creating false sales, as Okazaki described. They may also be running a tobashi scheme.”

Toudou’s words were very serious. General Energy Online was currently a hot topic in the American financial media.

News reports stated that the company was suspected of accounting fraud. Not only had they sent large amounts of debt incurred in foreign business blunders away to specified purpose companies, or SBCs, but the inflation of their sales due to round-tripping had sent their stock price plunging.

GEO ended up going all-or-nothing with their PR in the Japanese marketplace, sending in Blackship Energy, legally a Japanese company, as its vanguard. It was the most suspicious situation possible.

“Weren’t they advocating for the liberalization of electricity and being pressured by the US government?”

“Correct. GEO had a system of buying and selling repeatedly while purchasing gas from the marketplace. Using that system for electricity is how they got so big. They’re apparently trying to replicate the same scenario here on the Japanese energy market.”

That market had an aspect of gambling to it in addition to buying and selling. It had to mean that they wanted to become the dealer in Japan’s energy market casino, and the dealer always has an edge in the game. However, electric power

was a core part of infrastructure in modern society, which was why it was so heavily regulated.

This was the reason for America's pressure on the Koizumi administration, which was committed to the cause of deregulation.

There was no doubt that General Energy Online were the ones lobbying for the US government's actions.

"Is this a good time, my lady?"

After knocking on the door, Tachibana, Ichijou, and Katsura Naoyuki all entered the room. Judging by the arrival of my three treasurers all together, it was easy to predict that they had something serious to discuss, but I never expected to hear what I did.

"You have been officially adopted into the main Keikain family, and Kiyomaro-sama is now your legal guardian. As a result, actions are currently underway to remove the Moonlight Fund from your control."

Even though I was still just a minor in elementary school, they naturally wouldn't be able to take any fundamental legal actions without the consent of my legal proxy.

Until now, decisions about the Moonlight Fund's had been made by Tachibana, Ichijou, and Toudou, supposedly of "their own judgment," but actually under my instructions. I was still a minor and my orders had no legal power, which was why they acted on my behalf. At the same time, if anything bad happened, the buck stopped with those three and I would experience no backlash.

Now that I was an adopted daughter of the official Keikain family, Kiyomaro-tousama was able to influence the fund as he chose, but that also meant he would likely face consequences if something went wrong.

"This doesn't sound like something Kiyomaro-tousama would do. Who started this?"

I was once almost kidnapped by blood relatives of the Keikain family. That was why I wanted to believe that no one in my family was foolish enough to do something like this. Tachibana saw the unease on my face and forced a smile.

“Please don’t worry. It wasn’t the Keikain family, but this is even more ill-mannered. This was the work of the Iwazaki zaibatsu’s three pillars and the Iwazaki Corporation.”

The most powerful general trading company and the famous Iwazaki Corporation were baring their fangs at me. I covered my face, and I was unable to blame anyone for it.

“So that’s what’s going on?”

In the Imperial Gakushuukan Academy meeting hall, Asagiri Kaoru-san spoke as if the issue didn’t concern her. Well, her family was technically responsible, but it didn’t *actually* concern her. I wanted an indirect way of getting confirmation, and that was the response I got when I approached her about the topic.

“I don’t have any real proof, but I just thought I should ask if you know anything about it. Do you, Kaoru-san?”

“I’m not as close to adults and their business as you are, Runa-san. But allow me to explain a bit about the Iwazakis’ situation. Do you know about the three pillars of the Iwazaki zaibatsu?”

“I believe Iwazaki Honsha sits at the very top, with Iwazaki Heavy Industries Ltd., Iwazaki Corporation, and Imperial Iwazaki Bank as the three companies underneath, correct?”

“That’s right. What’s most important is for the list of companies you just mentioned to keep the same hierarchy.”

Iwazaki Honsha, the Iwazaki zaibatsu’s holding company, wasn’t involved in the management of individual companies. The actual work was done through a collegiate body of all the zaibatsu’s corporations, with the three pillars at the top of the hierarchy. That was why they were called “the organized Iwazaki.” However, this method of organization resulted in factions that took form in each of the three pillars.

“The absorption of the Keika Group was led by Iwazaki Chemicals from Iwazaki Heavy Industries. Now they’ve merged to form Keika-Iwazaki Chemical.

Iwazaki Heavy Industries is indebted to you because of the Iwazaki Motors bailout. The same goes for Iwazaki Bank, which my grandfather is president of. The Iwazaki organization isn't just for show. Do you think Iwazaki Corporation would do this and have two of the pillars remain silent?"

"No, I don't think that would do."

"Right. The Iwazaki Corporation is indirectly telling you, Runa-san, that they're discussing this now."

Ah. I never saw it that way. That's the Iwazaki organization for you. I pressed my hand to my chin and murmured to myself.

"Which means there's a third party whispering in the ear of the Iwazaki Corporation."

"That must also mean this person has to tell you things in a roundabout way."

Kaoru-san had a big smile on her face with that declaration. It looked like she had figured something out, but I could tell she couldn't reveal it to me.

"Runa-san, I want you to know that I'm your friend. Please don't forget that."

"Right. Thank you for everything, Kaoru-san."

"I think Iwazaki Corporation is after us."

Toudou Nagayoshi, the managing director of Akamatsu Corporation, had asked me for a meeting. I didn't hesitate to question him.

"What's your reasoning?"

"Our resources."

It was impossible not to agree with him. At this time, general trading companies were trying to change course to the resource business. Before the merger, Akamatsu Corporation had been rumored to be in financial trouble, which was why they were rapidly attempting to revive their management with Russian crude oil as their weapon. The Iwazaki zaibatsu had been investing heavily in the Karafuto government, and they had no reason not to set their sights on that now. This was because they were working on a project that

involved extending Russian pipelines from the far east to Karafuto.

“So do you think Iwazaki Corporation is really going to try to consume Akamatsu Corporation?”

“Of course not. I’m sure its members know about you, my lady, and they wouldn’t be so stupid. However, what we have to consider is why the rumor is being spread now.”

“Kaoru-san said something similar. It’s like they want me to know about it.”

“The young lady of the Asagiri Marquessate is the granddaughter of the Imperial Iwazaki Bank president, correct? If she is, then you can almost guarantee her information is accurate. There must be someone working with Iwazaki Corporation behind the scenes.”

“Someone who has to hide their name while they’re involved with the great Iwazaki Corporation... I see. If Iwazaki Corporation wanted to go after Akamatsu Corporation, how would they do it?”

“The Moonlight Fund holds the majority of the Akamatsu Corporation’s shares, and the Fund belongs to you, my lady. Iwazaki Corporation could never obtain Akamatsu Corporation unless you sold them your shares...under normal circumstances, at least.”

“And what would that...ah, I see. This is where Kiyomaro-tousama comes into play.”

“That is correct, my lady. Now that you are Kiyomaro-sama’s adopted daughter, he has the right to manage your assets. If the two of you gave different orders, we would have no choice but to prioritize Kiyomaro-sama’s commands.”

“I see. Someone must have given that information to Iwazaki Corporation. Then I’ll have no choice but to visit the main house.”

“It sounds like that’s the case.”

“Tachibana, prepare the car. I’m going to the main house.”

I picked up the receiver to have Tachibana bring the car out. Before I left the room, I asked Toudou one more question.

“Speaking of orders, do you intend to listen to Kiyomaro-tousama’s or mine?”

“Legally, Kiyomaro-sama’s. Emotionally, yours, my lady. But I have faith that you’re not that foolish.”

“Thank you.”

Shirokane District in Minato, Tokyo. That was the location of the main Keikain family house, a Western-and Japanese-styled manor in an affluent neighborhood.

Since I arrived in the evening, the three of us—Kiyomaro-tousama, Nakamaro-oniisama, and myself—ended up having dinner. It was a quiet, lavish meal, but everyone there was carefully calculating the timing.

“I heard you weren’t feeling well, but I’m glad to see you’re better now.”

“I’m sorry to have worried you, Father. I’m well enough to eat a meal like this now, so I wanted you to see that I was better.”

“Sakurako-san was worried about you too.”

“I apologize for the trouble, Nakamaro-oniisama. I embarrassed myself at your engagement party.”

“That’s nothing you need to worry about, Runa.”

We moved from on from the greetings to the main topic. Kiyomaro-tousama jumped right in once dessert was served.

“Runa, why don’t you move out of Kudanshita and come live here with us in Shirokane?”

“I believe I already turned down that offer. I said I didn’t want to get in the way of Nakamaro-oniisama settling into his newlywed life.”

“Don’t worry about me. This house has plenty of rooms and we already have a few relatives living here.”

Nakamaro-oniisama was drinking an after-dinner coffee while Kiyomaro-tousama instructed a maid to bring him wine. On the outside, they appeared to be worried about me. In fact, they’d had many opportunities up to this point to seize power from me. So why now? I didn’t understand it yet.

“Seeing you collapse made me realize something, Runa. You’re a child standing up against the world at such a young age. It’s all right to let me and Nakamaro take on some of your burdens.”

“I’m not concerned with what you do, Runa, but I do want to take responsibility for it. I’m your big brother, after all, and the heir to the Keikain Dukedom too.”

They were both showing pity for me. They looked to be truly concerned.

“Even though some of my burdens will inconvenience the two of you?”

“I won’t deny that.”

“Right. We know people are trying to take away what’s yours, Runa.”

They were making no attempt to hide anything at this point. That made me so happy that I hesitated to get them caught up in my affairs now.

“You could have taken it if you wanted to.”

“But I don’t want to be the kind of terrible father who steals his child’s belongings.”

“I had friends whose family took their new year’s money away, said they’d return it when they grew up, but never gave it back in the end. They still hold it against those relatives now. I don’t want you to feel that way about me, Runa,” Nakamaro-oniisama added.

The grape juice I’d been served after dinner had grown a bit lukewarm. I took a sip before continuing.

“There are rumors of Akamatsu Corporation being bought out by Iwazaki Corporation. Do you know anything about this?”

“I’ve heard relatives talking about it. If the Keikain family is going to separate from the businesses and join the Iwazaki zaibatsu, it would be best to merge the companies with Iwazaki now. Runa, do you know why I sold the Keika Group to the Iwazaki zaibatsu?”

Kiyomaro-tousama’s words were gentle, yet they also had a sense of pushing people away. It was the exact model of how a noble like a duke should behave.

“Wasn’t it to dispose of bad debts?”

“No, that’s not it. Runa, weren’t you the one who handled that for the Keika Group?”

Nakamaro-oniisama softly explained it to me.

“The main reason was that it was better for us to leave the work up to other people.”

I’d never thought of that. The two men smiled, and I realized my reaction must have been showing on my face.

“You can feel it too, can’t you, Runa? The bigger a business gets, and the more companies you buy up, the more people you need. And you need people you can trust to manage it all.”

I nodded. Without Tachibana, Ichijou, and Toudou, I would never be able to control the companies I managed, and it wasn’t as if those three had full authority, either. All I did was curb the power of those companies with buyouts and bailouts; other than that, I was an outsider to them.

“The Iwazaki zaibatsu has been around since the Meiji era, and they now manage a great number of talented people. Without that abundant resource, I felt it would be difficult to continue controlling the company in the future.”

Kiyomaro-tousama continued after Nakamaro-oniisama.

“Personally, I intend to step down from the position of chairman of Keika-Iwazaki Pharmaceuticals and devote myself to the Choufuu Council. The president is someone from Iwazaki Pharma, but after Nakamaro the presidency is reserved...”

“I’m happy to hear that, but I don’t want to be so arrogant as to push aside one of the talented Iwazaki employees for the position.”

“Excuse me,” the house’s butler suddenly interrupted with an announcement. “I’ve just received word that Sakurako-sama of the Asagiri Marquessate is on her way for a visit.”

I noticed Nakamaro-oniisama’s gaze quickly shift onto me. That meant I was her target. After some time, Sakurako-san arrived.

“Good evening, Duke Keikain, Nakamaro-san, and Runa-chan. I just happened to be in the neighborhood.”

“No problem. This will be your home soon, after all.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself, Father.”

“Good evening, Sakurako-san. I don’t think we’ve seen each other since the party in Kudanshita.”

In response to my greeting, Sakurako-san handed me a large envelope.

“My grandfather asked me to bring this over if I found myself at the house. It’s gibberish to me, but you’ll understand it, won’t you, Runa-chan?”

After the four of us chatted for a while, it was getting late enough that I left the house for the night. Sakurako-san was so eager to hear me sing that I was forced to perform a song before departing. Thankfully, my driver that day was Watabe-san, the former violinist. Thinking back on the night’s events, I began to grow very sleepy, but I decided to ask a question of Tachibana, who was at my side.

“Tachibana, whose orders would you obey between Kiyomaro-tousama and me?”

“I work for the Keikain family, so I cannot disobey any of their orders, including yours. However, I ordered my granddaughter Yuka to work for you personally, my lady. If such a time ever comes, please make use of Yuka instead of me.”

“Thank you for such an exemplary, pleasing answer.”

Hearing that made me ready to close my eyes and fall asleep, but just then my hand touched the envelope. *That’s right, Sakurako-san said this was for me.* I removed the contents and began to read the report inside...

“What *is* this...?”

My drowsiness was instantly replaced with a surge of anger.

“We’ve gathered the evidence, my lady. It’s not good news.”

A few days had passed since then. Ichijou arrived before me with the color in his face completely drained. I wasn't sure if that was because I'd ordered him to look into the documents Sakurako-san gave me or because he could see the anger on my face.

"These are the basics. General Energy Online is currently experiencing a major stock price crash over concerns of fraudulent accounting. Their cash flow is under intense scrutiny. News reports state that they may be bought out by a rival firm, but that would require funds to manage their losses."

"And how does that involve us?"

"It's the electricity market they created. They'll need collateral to keep it running, but the market's faith in them is shaken due to the crash of their stock price, so they will have to provide even more collateral."

"A margin call," I murmured to myself. Ichijou gave a satisfied nod.

"Exactly. My lady, GEO is in a place where they need to quickly prepare more funds to cover this call. That's where we come into the story."

"They have money invested in the Moonlight Fund. That's what this is about, right?"

"Correct. Adding Angela-san to the company allowed the United States government to peek at our accounts. They must have realized they have money sitting idly in the Moonlight Fund. General Energy Online is donating a great deal of money to the current administration. The Iwazaki zaibatsu members must have chosen to muddy the waters out of speculation toward the American government."

"Why did Iwazaki decide to get involved in this?"

This would explain the whole situation. Ichijou looked away from me when I asked the question.

"Imperial Iwazaki Bank supposedly holds 35 billion yen in credit for General Energy Online. That won't wound them fatally, but the president may be criticized for their responsibility in this."

I see. So that's why Iwazaki decided to take action. Seeing that I understood,

Ichijou continued.

“There were a few leaders of the Iwazaki zaibatsu who opposed the complete absorption of the Keika Group. There were also some in the Keikain family who were displeased with your current position at the top of the Keika Group. That all came to a head on the day of the terrorist attacks.”

September 11th. Those attacks caused major damage to the global economy. At the same time, they took place in a system where one person’s loss became another’s gain.

“Suffering losses isn’t a problem. The real problem is people’s opinion that the Keika Group was lost at sea from the moment you fainted until you woke up again.”

Ichijou had made it clear. While I was unconscious, Tachibana, Ichijou, and Toudou all did whatever they could to minimize losses. However, some people only ever looked at results.

“Wouldn’t their losses have been even smaller if Keikain Runa had been awake?”

There was no answer to that hypothetical question. My being a grade-schooler was a unique trait that only emphasized the uncertainty even more. That was the weakness being exploited.

“So why did Iwazaki Corporation step up?”

“General trading companies can do a little of everything. They’re also in charge of gas development in Karafuto. Blackship Energy is buying our gas to sell to Iwazaki Corporation. They wanted to take over Akamatsu Corporation at the same time too.”

“Toudou told me about that. They want our resources, right?”

“Correct. My lady, Karafuto is close to having an expanded gas pipeline from Russia. The chemical combine under construction in Sakata is also appealing because they’re working on their own thermal power station. As they’re after the liberalization of energy, GEO would want this more than anything.”

“So that’s where these came from.”

I tapped the documents on my desk that had been delivered by Sakurako-san. The title read, "Plans for management reorganization after the absorption of the Keika Group." It was an outline for large-scale restructuring with an American style of detailed management.

"We will sell Akamatsu Corporation's resource department to Blackship Energy and have Iwazaki Corporation absorb everything remaining. Once this is complete, we will reduce Akamatsu Corporation's staff by 20 percent and pass on any resulting profits to the shareholders."

Keika Holdings will be merged with Imperial Iwazaki Bank, which is to receive 70 percent of management."

This restructuring on both ends will require over 50 percent of personnel to be let go..."

This plan would cause the Keika Group to lose half of its employees. Of course, this would be of no benefit to the Keikain family, so the Iwazakis had prepared their own way of sweetening the deal.

"So the profits from this restructuring would be paid to the Keikains as a dividend. Ichijou, how serious was the Iwazaki zaibatsu about this?"

"Probably halfway or so."

Ichijou answered my question immediately. That was still more serious than I'd expected them to be.

"The Iwazaki zaibatsu isn't foolish enough to make an enemy of you. However, businesses aren't so kind that they'll let the perfect prey get away when it's right in front of them. That's why the Iwazakis were testing to see if you would react."

If I hadn't recovered... No, I was probably still being tested. I hadn't responded at all yet.

"My lady, what do you think is the point of this story?"

"It must be the fact that I revealed a weakness."

"No, that's not it."

Ichijou smiled and explained it to me as an adult explains things to a child.

“It’s the fact that everyone wants to help you.”

That revelation made my mind go blank for a moment. Ichijou smiled awkwardly at my reaction.

“Why wouldn’t they? You’re an elementary school girl leading a massive business group, and you also have a heavy hand in politics as well. That’s exactly why you fainted when the terrorists attacked. Of course, I’m sure you had your own hidden benefits too, but concealing them demonstrated good intentions in this trade. Assuming, of course, that you’re not ignoring your own desires.”

I couldn’t muster up an answer to that. But the anger I felt when I first read those documents was still dwelling in my heart.

“What were the Keika Group’s profits like this year?”

“The rough number is a profit of 450 billion yen. Iwazaki would get more than half of that according to this plan, but I’m sure there would be at least 200 billion yen left for you.”

While it was unfair to have Iwazaki make off with over half the profits, earning 200 billion yen a year just to live an easy life would certainly have been something for the Keikain family to consider. After all, they already wanted to step away from the management roles. But that would only happen if I could ignore my own desires and allow that other half to be unfairly stolen.

“Thank you, Ichijou. I have one last question. Between Kiyomaro-tousama and me, whose orders would you follow?”

“Yours, my lady. I don’t belong to the Keikain family, and I wouldn’t be sitting here right now without your support. But that’s exactly why I can’t criticize the main family members or the Iwazakis. I’ll be taking my leave now.”

A while after Ichijou had gone, my maid Ichijou Erika entered the room with snacks.

“I see you’re on duty today, Erika-san. Your father was here earlier.”

“I know. He came to see me on his way back and scolded me like a child, telling me not to get in your way.”

I smiled at her pouting and decided to ask her a question while she was there.

“Hey, Erika-san, would you want to join a company where the top person out of five employees gets a big bonus, but the lowest performer gets fired?”

“Definitely not. I’m not planning to work for very long, so wouldn’t it be stressful to always be competing like that?”

“That’s true. Thank you.”

“Please let me know when you’re done with your snacks.”

With that, Ichijou Erika left the room. But instead of enjoying a snack, I just stared at the documents Sakurako-san gave me.

If you knowingly took a job under those conditions, perhaps you would need to take responsibility. But if the company was purchased and changed to that kind of system, was it really okay to call it “bad luck” and leave it at that?

This wasn’t just about Akamatsu Corporation. Speaking with Kiyomaro-tousama and Nakamaro-oniisama made it clear: if we left management up to the Iwazakis, the former Keika Group employees would be the victims of the restructuring.

That was the future I least wanted to see. It was why I purchased Hokkaido Kaitaku Bank and got involved in politics and the economy. After all my good faith, was this result supposed to make me happy?!

Give me a break!

I slammed my fists on the papers, and the dull thud rang in my ears. My hands ached, but my anger was gone.

I needed to stand up. I couldn’t stop here.

I made up my mind. I was going to defy the times once again.

It wasn’t for anyone else, but for me.

“After rumors of accounting fraud leading to financial turbulence, General Energy Online has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, marking an end to the company’s operations. Known debts reportedly amount to 40 billion yen. Before

the collapse, GEO was a top-seven earner in sales within the United States, and America is reeling from the revelation that so many analysts and corporate auditors failed to discover the fraud. Reports have now established that Japanese financial institutions provided 100 billion yen in credit and loans to General Energy Online, with MMFs on the other end of these loans losing their principal investments...”

I was called to the main Keikain house in Shirokane. There I met President Iwazaki Yashiro, who had arrived as Sakurako-san’s attendant. He bowed his head to me.

“Runa-kun, I’ve really caused you a lot of trouble during all this.”

“That’s all right. Let’s call it a wedding gift for Sakurako-san.”

We were talking about the Moonlight Fund’s purchase of 35 billion yen of credit that Imperial Iwazaki Bank held for General Energy Online.

As a result, their competitors at Futaki Yodoyabashi Bank suffered 33 billion yen in extraordinary losses, while Imperial Iwazaki Bank’s losses added up to nothing.



Naturally, our purchase of the credit was nothing more than worthless paper, but the Moonlight Fund had managed to hammer out a return that made up for the losses in the end.

“This is the second time you’ve helped us after Iwazaki Motors. I’m not so shameless that I can just forget about both debts.”

“Is that so? Then I have a small request for you.”

I showed the president a smile and revealed what I needed from him.

“I want to oust the president of Furukawa Telecoms.”

President Iwazaki’s eyes had been friendly, but now they belonged to a man ready to do business. Before he could speak, I continued.

“I have no plans to purchase the company, but if Furukawa Telecoms doesn’t get back on its feet, it will affect the management of Shiyo Electric.”

Furukawa Telecoms was set to be deep in the red this year after the bursting of the IT bubble, and the president was now under fire for his responsibility. Furukawa Telecoms’s main financial institution was Honami Bank, which had recently merged with banks from multiple cities and was unable to display leadership in the organization. They were also struggling to dispose of bad debts.

But if Keika Holdings and Imperial Iwazaki Bank, two major megabanks, jointly declared no confidence in the president, Honami Bank likely wouldn’t protect Furukawa Telecoms over their nonperforming loans. Having a zaibatsu-owned megabank like Imperial Iwazaki Bank give up on the company would be a display of authority.

“If you’d prefer, then the Iwazakis could take over Furukawa Telecoms themselves.”

President Iwazaki looked carefully at me. Instead of responding, he asked me his own question next.

“Runa-kun, I want to ask you something. You could have saved General Energy Online if you wanted to. You would have had a major energy company with branches all over the United States and Japan. It had close ties to the

American president, and twenty thousand employees will probably be left without jobs after this collapse. Why didn't you save them?"

I hadn't taken any action when General Energy Online was letting out its final death cries. Just as President Iwazaki said, I could have saved the company if I wanted to. Iwazaki Corporation and the American government had also approached me with indirect requests for help after the collapse, but I refused to budge.

Keikain Kiyomaro was now my adopted father, but even with my guardianship rights, he didn't try to take managing control away from me. Nor did he become more aggressive when the Iwazaki zaibatsu, Iwazaki Motors, and Imperial Iwazaki Bank became indebted to me. By the time he approved my independent actions, General Energy Online had no time or funds left to survive.

The best proposal they could come up with resulted in their own self-destruction.

"I may look different on the outside, but I'm still a Japanese person. I love things like duties of humanity and *naniwabushi*."

I stroked my blonde hair as I spoke.

"I probably would have saved General Energy Online if their employees came and knelt down before me for help, but they never did. Instead, I received that report from Sakurako-san."

I knew that a sneer had formed on my face.

"Did you know that the leaders of General Energy Online supposedly sold off their stock options before the collapse, abandoning almost twenty thousand employees who were going to be left in the cold?"

Sakurako-san's reports described these measures. They even considered the possibility that the Iwazaki zaibatsu could be dissolved for political reasons, so they were going to short Iwazaki companies for a potential profit in case the unthinkable happened. It was a level of selfishness that surpassed anger and left me only with astonishment.

I didn't take any action, which meant that I hadn't shorted General Energy

Online before the collapse either.

They knew that when they made their big gamble, and I didn't want to go along and end up in the same place as them.

"They must have thought it would be a wonderful proposal for the Keikain family. If the Keika Group really was managed like it said in that report, the Keikains could live an easy life without having to do any management work. That was the arrangement they laid out. But the large-scale restructuring would have meant a lot of layoffs. I see. So that was your reasoning?"

President Iwazaki clapped his hands. I shrugged and looked out the nearby window.

"Why save the group who reached out for the hand that already saved them, you mean?"

"And that's why you're going to reach your hand out to Furukawa Telecoms, not Iwazaki Motors?"

"There's work to be done now before the loans go bad."

Who was it that said the economy was eat or be eaten? I was almost eaten just by refusing to act. Now it was time to make moves. I would rather eat before I get eaten.

"Mr. President, if it's necessary, I don't mind if you repay those favors for this plan."

President Iwazaki fell silent for a moment before his sigh reached my ears.

"I'll agree to your plan, but be sure to get permission from your father and Nakamaro-kun. That's my condition."

I pretended not to see the sad look on the president's face at that moment. Only I knew how much worse things would get if I didn't act now.

Glossary and Notes

Deregulation of electricity: The relaxation of policies after the Tohoku

earthquake resulted in many problems.

Proxy representative: Most minors are legally represented by their parents, but those without parents can choose a proxy representative.

Margin call: A method for financial institutions to inform investors when funds in an account are too low to maintain a position. When a trader is margin called, they must provide more funds or have their positions forcibly closed out, which is known as cutting losses.

Large-scale restructuring: After the collapse of Enron, the company split its employees into five tiers. The top 20 percent were given stock options and bonuses, but the bottom 20 percent were let go in a brutal display of societal competition.

MMF: Money management fund.

Chapter 13:

The Gentlemen's Pact

THE THREE BOYS from the Quartet were gathered at Avanti without Runa. It was unusual to have a day where she didn't join them, and they found themselves tense in their conversations without her. They ordered coffee before bringing up the main point of discussion.

"This is why I wanted to see you guys. Take a look at this."

Gotou Mitsuya pulled out the quarterly financials for their startup company, TIG Systems.

The company name was an acronym for the first initials of their family names, and their profits were still skyrocketing despite the burst of the IT bubble.

There were two reasons for this. The first was Teia Motor Company handing over maintenance work of their mobile internet sites to Gotou Mitsuya and a few others. The second was the rapid growth in available funds for the company to use under their name.

"Looks like another big increase..."

"It's because of the short selling, right? Everything worked out, which is good, but who knows what could have happened if we were wrong? The company revenue was apparently 40 million yen."

"Well, I had a feeling anything under Runa's brand would work out."

Izumikawa Yuujirou let out a sigh of relief, but Teia Eiichi, who'd formed the plan to short General Energy Online, made only that simple declaration. By watching Runa so closely, he'd learned about her shutdown of GEO and ended up shorting them with company money.

"It seems like we can finally make it to the starting line."

"Keikain is putting up a terrific fight way up ahead of us, but that doesn't mean we can't catch up to her."

“This is going to be a long journey.”

The three boys were always around Runa, and it would be a lie to say that they didn't experience any romantic feelings for her. But between Runa's personality, which shone as brilliantly as the sun, and the way her talents continued to expand the scale of the Keika Group, all the boys were struggling to find a way to express those feelings.

They came together and had a heart-to-heart which resulted in a gentlemen's agreement to try and save up their own money through business ventures before confessing their feelings to her. They were now attempting the first step of their plan.

“So, what will we do with this money?”

“That's what I want to talk about.”

“I vote we go with the reliable option and use it to expand the business.”

Izumikawa Yuujirou jumped straight to the safe option. As the one in charge of finances and sales, he had been extremely nervous about the outcome of the short selling. They wouldn't be ruined if it failed, but it was a big gamble with their money, and the wait for the results of their endeavor wreaked havoc on his stomach.

He would feel much more comfortable avoiding the headache next time and going with straightforward expansion.

“So how do we expand the company?”

“Now that the IT bubble in the US has burst, we can hire American programmers for cheap. It burst in Japan first, but most people haven't thought about how they're going to maintain their websites yet, and they haven't even started working on mobile sites. I think this is the angle we should go with.”

Gotou Mitsuya, in charge of technology and business practices, interjected.

“That's not bad, but the clients need to be thinking about what they want to do on mobile sites before they get on board, right? We are seeing a lot of advertising revenue, though.”

Teia Eiichi was next to chime in.

“We’ve already got an offer to buy up TIG Systems for 2 billion yen.”

They’d bet 4 million dollars on their short selling endeavor, which was roughly the equivalent of 480 million yen at that time. Their yearly revenue was 160 million yen, and with 480 million yen and their borrowed funds returned, they’d received an offer of a buyout for 2 billion yen.



The three boys were finally getting a taste of the pressure Runa had been experiencing by herself all this time. Not one of them had touched the coffees they had ordered.

“The potential buyer is the company behind the largest portal site. Supposedly, they still have money even after the bubble burst. The president came to talk to me in person at the party.”

In fact, “the company with the largest portal site” included Runa among its investors. Even before she burst the bubble, she held onto IT stocks throughout all the selloffs, used them as collateral to take out loans, and was now entering the communication industry.

She had created a buzz by giving out a large number of ADSL routers around town for free.

“You have mobile sites that can handle an overwhelming amount of demand. I want to add them to our portal site to make it more appealing. But my ulterior motive is to win your company’s favor so that I can use you as a source of future business.”

The CEO had laughed as he explained this to Teia Eiichi, but Eiichi couldn’t forget the cold, calculating look in his eyes. He had the face of someone who was after profit. Runa probably made that same face when she wasn’t around the three boys. They, on the other hand, were in the position to inherit from others. They knew that it was a separate talent in itself.

“Well, what do you want to do, Teia? I’ll go with whatever you decide. To be honest, this is probably as far as the three of us can take this business.”

Gotou Mitsuya, in charge of technology, was the first to voice his opinion.

As an engineer, he had come to discover that higher-ups existed even on the internet, which was a reminder of his own limits.

“I agree. I’ll be taking the path of politics someday. This isn’t my battlefield.”

Izumikawa Yuujirou spoke next. Though he couldn’t become a dietman, he had been promised a position in local government, such as membership in a prefectural assembly. If they ended things here, the company would be a nice

early-career success for him to boast of.

But things were different for Teia Eiichi. The economy was his battlefield, just as it was Runa's.

"Let's sell it, but we're not stopping here. At the very least, we won't be able to catch up to Runa through respectable means."

As a son raised in the distinguished family that controlled the Teia Group, this was his way of showing what he was capable of.

He hadn't given up on matching Runa's success yet.

"All right. So there's more still to come, Teia?" asked Gotou Mitsuya.

"There is. We'll be riding on Runa's coattails, but that's our only option."

After answering Gotou's question, Teia Eiichi concluded his speech and opened a business magazine. Inside was an article about the slump of a certain company.

"Whether it's Runa or that president, there's a sense that the communications industry will be from the next big thing in the IT world. Neither of those two are taking on communication terminals on their own. They'll probably work to maintain terminals to that end. We'll buy up the company's stocks while we still can."

The three boys weren't sure about the president, but they knew that Runa had taken on and reorganized the management of Shiyo Electric Co. Teia Eiichi was confident that Runa wouldn't pass up the chance to make use of Shiyo's main products: small-scale liquid crystal and batteries.

"Furukawa Telecoms. They're publicly listed and the Ashio zaibatsu is losing their control, so they'll probably abandon it once the government intervenes too much. I'll bet they're Runa's next target."

Glossary and Notes

Short selling: The repeated process of borrowing shares to sell off, buying

them back once the stock price drops, and returning them again. Borrowing shares incurs a rental fee, but you can make significant profits if the price drops far enough.

Heart-to-heart: From *Suiyou Dou Deshou's* Living Hell Tour.

Afterword

THANK YOU very much for purchasing this book. My name is Tofuro Futsukaichi, the author of this work.

This story takes place from the spring to the winter of 2001.

September 11th. I still remember the shock I felt as I watched those coordinated terrorist attacks take place. To be honest, I wasn't sure whether or not to write about them.

I actually made up my mind because of movies. Once we reached the 2010s, what started to come out of America wasn't documentaries, but movies that covered 9/11 as a part of history, where I was shown examples of America's cultural strength.

The world changed on that day. The changes in modern times are connected to all of your lives right now, to those who have purchased this book.

If you watched the world as it changed back then, please remember those moments, if only just a little.

If you didn't witness it yourself, then I hope you'll simply remember that these things really happened.

Our world is still changing here in 2021. But someday, this too will become history. We are standing at the peak of all the choices that have shaped the world into what it is today.

I don't know how the world will change from here on out, but I'm sure someone will tell the story of these very moments someday. As a person who has lived in these times, I am eager to support that story.

While I have you here, I may as well discuss some behind-the-scenes information about this book.

I would define myself as the type of author who writes the parts they want to first and works out the pacing of the overarching story later.

Those who are keeping up with the online version of the story probably already know that I don't write story developments in their proper order.

You're very perceptive if you read this book and sensed that something was off. I generally write more sections and make corrections after I'm finished with the rest, which caused my editor to bury their head in their hands once we reviewed my mistakes after publication.

Finally, I would like to use this space to express my gratitude.

Thank you to *Shousetsuka ni Narou* ("Let's Be Novelists"), the site where I get to tell Keikain Runa's story. I really did become a novelist.

Thank you to the representative from Overlap who contacted me to get the book published, and to KEI-san for your wonderful illustrations. I cannot thank you two enough.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, to everyone who helped this book to be published.

Finally, I would like to sincerely thank all the readers who bought this book. Thank you so much.

That's all from me. I'll pray that we can meet each other again in the next volume.



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